

INSIDE WRESTLING & THE WRESTLER

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INSIDE WRESTLING

HE'LL NEVER ADMIT IT, BUT...

**RANDY
ORTON
NEEDS YOUR
CHEERS**

A Second Look At WrestleMania:

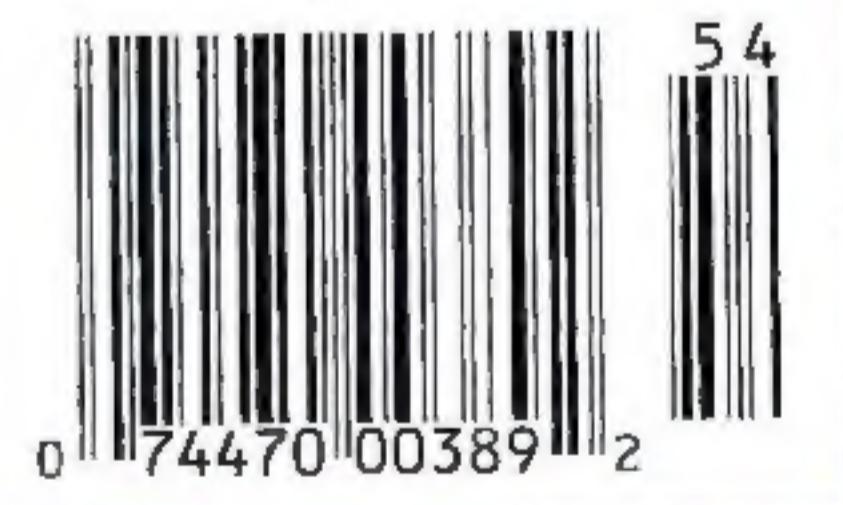
**WHO WERE THE REAL
WINNERS AND LOSERS?**

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names makin' news

By Harry Burkett

ROB VAN DAM won the TNA World heavyweight title in what is considered a breakthrough performance for both his career and the company. TNA seized on the crater-sized opportunity created by an Icelandic volcano—the spew of which detained thousands of travelers, including the entire Raw roster, in Europe—and threw everything it had into its April 19 edition of *Impact* while **Triple-H**, **Vladimir Kozlov**, and a smattering of Smackdown superstars tried to pull off a hastily arranged edition of *Monday Night Raw*.

It paid off, considering the April 19 *Impact* received critical acclaim—a rarity among Internet pundits—for its logical storytelling, its basic build-up toward the championship main event, and the surprise turn of direction following TNA's Lockdown pay-per-view the previous night.

To win the coveted title shot, Van Dam wrestled **Jeff Hardy**—who has long been touted as RVD's

dream opponent—during the first hour of the show. While TNA risked losing a potential PPV moneymaker by offering the Van Dam-Hardy bout, the energy level inside the Impact Zone was extremely high when it came time for the two daredevils to do battle. "This is awesome!" chants erupted when RVD delivered a spinwheel kick to Hardy on the top rope. Van Dam tried to follow up with a superplex, but Hardy shoved him off and attempted a premature Swanton bomb. Van Dam moved, Hardy crashed and burned, and RVD launched off with a Five-Star Frog Splash to score the victory at the 12-minute mark.

The high-flying dream match rolled into *Impact*'s second hour, opposite the beginning of *Raw*'s first hour, which featured a long-winded, insult-laden monologue by Triple-H. TNA marched forward by offering a star-studded eight-man tag team match—**Team Hogan** vs. **Team Flair**—that featured **Jeff Jarrett**, **Abyss**, **Samoa Joe**, and **Rob Terry** in a victory over **Sting**, **Desmond Wolfe**, and **Beer Money Inc.**

Yet that was simply an appetizer for Van Dam's match against World champion **A.J. Styles**. The champ's primary job was to stop Van Dam's momentum, and he showed signs of doing that with an impressive flip-dive from the ring and onto RVD on the arena floor. Later, Van Dam turned Styles' springboard attempt into a power bomb and then finished him off with the Five-Star Frog Splash as well.

So how did *Impact* do on the ultimate truth-meter, the Nielsen ratings? It turned out to be relatively good news for *Impact* and relatively bad news for *Raw*. I say "relatively" because *Raw* beat *Impact* by two full points, 3.1 to 1.0, but it was a moral victory for *Impact* in that it scored a 1.0 on a Monday night for the first time since its three-hour special on January 4, and it narrowed the ratings gap to 2.1 between the two shows—again, the same result as January 4.

The Van Dam victory gives TNA a renewed sense of purpose and optimism. It comes when it seems that both creative head **Vince Russo** and former top star A.J. Styles have lost their footing in the company somewhat, and RVD—who personifies TNA as the cool alternative—could be effective in wooing his legions of fans away from WWE.

Nobody saw this coming. Van Dam was relegated to the opener, a victory over **James Storm**, at Lockdown the previous night. The power struggle between **Hulk Hogan** and **Ric Flair** took center stage

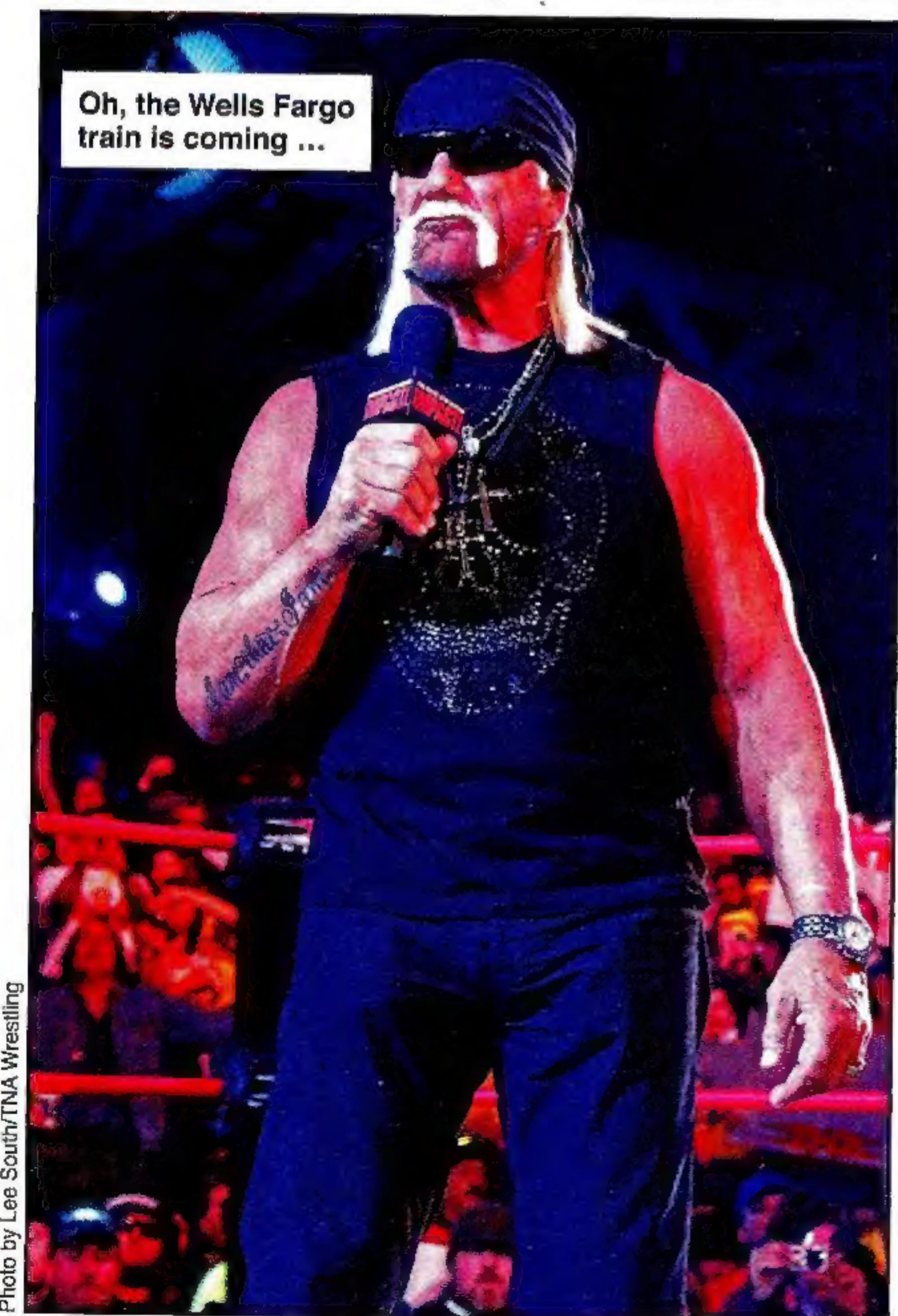


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Jericho looking to give back

committed when TNA officials made the bizarre decision to strip him of the X division title when he was stranded in Europe during the volcanic eruption in Iceland. **Kazarian** won the vacant championship in a three-way match also involving **Shannon Moore** and **Homicide**, although he wasn't given a title belt because that remained with Williams in England. It's blatantly unfair for Williams to be punished for something he had absolutely no control over. That would be like having the cast of *MacGruber* strip **John Cena** of the WWE title and determining a new champion on that Monday's *Raw*!

In other steel cage clashes at Lockdown, **Kurt Angle** defeated **Mr. Anderson** ... **Team 3-D** beat **Scott Hall & Kevin Nash** ... **Madison Rayne**, teaming with **Velvet Sky**, pinned **Tara**, teaming with **Angelina Love**, for the Knockouts singles title in a bout where the Knockouts tag team belts were also at stake ... Nash beat **Eric Young** ... Homicide defeated **Brian Kendrick, Chris Sabin, and Alex Shelley** in an Xscape match.

Hulk Hogan made some interesting comments immediately following the April 19 *Impact*, referring to his "ego" of the past. "I got so selfish," he said. "I was looking for a way to live and keep this wrestling business in my blood. I tried to get in there and wrestle, but the way these guys function, it's not really possible for me. So, my dream is coming true, I'm part of this team, and I get to live and have that same wrestling vibe."

That's good news for Hogan, who is also counting on a positive vibe coming from his insurance company. "The Hulkster" is suing Wells Fargo Southeast because he claims company representatives failed to advise him that his \$250,000 policy limit put his \$30-million fortune at risk in his recent case against the family of **John Graziano**, who was permanently injured in a Florida car crash caused by Hogan's son **Nick Bollea**.

It's believed that Hogan paid out millions of dollars to the Graziano family and now wants to recoup his losses.

TNA released **Christopher Daniels** at the expiration of his contract on March 31, ending his seven years with the company. His final appearance was a dark match against **Kazuchika Okada** during a set of *Impact* tapings. Daniels' standing in the company plummeted meteorically since his high-profile return in a match against Kurt Angle last year. Daniels has returned to Ring of Honor, where he is considered one of the promotion's founding fathers. Mysteriously, **Curry Man** has re-emerged and will make occasional appearances for CHIKARA.

as Team Hogan took on Team Flair in the annual Lethal Lockdown match. Jarrett, Abyss, Van Dam, and Jeff Hardy beat Sting, Wolfe, and Beer Money in a brawl involving baseball bats, cookie sheets, and trash cans. Abyss used his patented Black-Hole Slam on Wolfe to score the victory, but the real visual came seconds earlier when Hogan used Flair as a bloody mop, bashing him with a pair of brass knuckles, knocking him down onto thumbtacks, and ramming him into the four sides of steel again and again.

D'Angelo Dinero continued his flirtation with main-event status, challenging Styles for the World title inside the cage at Lockdown. Styles missed a monster dive off the top of the steel structure and "The Pope" rolled him up for a quick pin attempt, nearly capturing the gold. But in the lamest finish since **Arn Anderson** hit **Randy Savage** with **Elizabeth's** shoe to help Ric Flair win the WCW title, the so-called "Phenomenal One" grabbed an ink pen from outside the cage and poked Dinero in the eye and followed that with a spinning clothesline and a Styles Clash to score the pinfall. Hey, at least it's more believable than a sledgehammer.

I don't defend **The British Invasion** very often, but **Doug Williams** can rightfully claim a travesty was



There should be no wondering as to what time it is for Morgan. The "Blueprint" should know that now is the time when he should be making his move up the singles ladder, not lurking around backstage looking for a new tag team partner to attack.

Hogan ego coupled with plain old stubbornness. By doing only what he wants (or doesn't want) to do with Morgan, Hogan could be trying to send a message that he intends to run TNA *his* way and will not be swayed by what others want.

Whether right or wrong, the fact remains that the onus is now on Morgan to cut through the clutter in Hogan's mind and demand more than he's been given so far. One way to do that is to abdicate the TNA World tag team title, which has lost much of its prestige since Morgan sent his former partner south of the border. Doing this would free Morgan from keeping up the ridiculous charade of acting like a tag team champion and essentially make him exclusively a singles wrestler who could then systematically work his way up the TNA rankings until the company has no choice but to give him a title shot. However, this option might not produce the immediate results Morgan needs to increase his profile right away.

A somewhat more direct path Morgan might consider is resuming his feud with Abyss. Targeting TNA's resident monster would certainly get Hogan's attention. After all, Hogan has personally hand-picked Abyss to be his TNA side-kick, and even gave his WWE Hall of Fame ring to the big man. It was an honor Hogan could have just as easily bestowed on Morgan had Morgan made an impression on him.

Hogan wasn't around to see Morgan best Abyss in their brutal 2009 feud, which climaxed at Lockdown last year, so perhaps Morgan's best option at this point might just be to get right up in Hogan's face directly ... and soon. It's a drastic step the ultra-confident Morgan appears willing to take.

"I don't know why or how I got lost in the shuffle, and I don't really care," Morgan said. "All I know is Hogan has a seven-foot, 310-pound asset in his back pocket and I'm gonna remind him that it's time he starts using it!" □



TNA fans and Insiders alike are surprised that Hogan hasn't pushed Morgan, a wrestler that seems to fit the "Hulkster's" idea of a real wrestling superstar. Instead of directing his frustration at Brutus Magnus and other TNA wrestlers, Morgan would do better to send some Hogan's way.



THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

Section Compiled By Dan Murphy

AN ANNOUNCED CROWD of 72,219 fans packed the University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale, Arizona, to take in the pomp, pageantry, and action that is wrestling's biggest spectacle of the year.

WrestleMania 26 promised one of the most loaded lineups in years, including Bret "The Hitman" Hart's return to the ring for a one-on-one showdown against Vince McMahon, Shawn Michaels putting his career on the line against the most celebrated streak in wrestling in a rematch from 2009's Match of the Year, and John Cena squaring off against Batista for bragging rights and the WWE title.

Ten matches aired on the pay-per-view telecast, which was preceded by a 26-man battle royal. In all, 65 men and women participated in the event, making WrestleMania 26 one of the busiest and largest 'Manias ever.

Each year, the editors of this magazine examine what occurred at WrestleMania and how what occurred will affect

WWE in the months to come. Naturally, every match has a winner and a loser, but many matches also have additional "winners" and "losers" who have a vested interest in the outcome of that particular match.

For example, Rey Mysterio Jr. scored a decisive win over C.M. Punk. Mysterio won the match and Punk lost the match. But the biggest winner of that match wasn't Rey, it was his daughter, Aaliyah, who got to see her father give a bully a much-deserved beating. And the biggest loser of the match wasn't Punk, who will certainly get many rematches against Mysterio in the coming months. The real losers were the Straight Edge Society and Darren Young, as they'll have to deal with a bitter and angry Punk.

Sometimes the real winners and losers are obvious; sometimes they simply find themselves in a better position because of the match than they were before that match took place. After all, the biggest winner of the night not only lost his match, his career ended as well.



WRESTLEMANIA

26-MAN BATTLE ROYAL

WHAT HAPPENED: Once again, WWE presented a pre-show battle royal featuring wrestlers who did not have a match on the main card. Twenty-six wrestlers were featured in the match, which did not air on the pay-per-view event but will be included on WWE's DVD release of the event.

The participants in the battle royal included: Mark Henry, The Great Khali, Carlito, Primo, Caylen Croft, Trent Barreta, Chris Masters, David Hart Smith, Tyson Kidd, Jimmy Wang Yang, JTG, Shad Gaspard, Finlay, Goldust, Luke Gallows, Yoshi Tatsu, Mike Knox, Kung Funaki, Hornswoggle, Santino Marella, Chavo Guerrero Jr., Slam Master J, Tyler Reks, Vance Archer, Vladimir Kozlov, and William Regal.

Once the bell sounded, the smaller wrestlers immediately began targeting the giants like Henry, Khali, and Kozlov, teaming up to overwhelm the favorites and toss them from the ring. (It took eight men to remove Khali.) Once the big men were gone, the smaller, more nimble wrestlers had a chance to shine. That included Hornswoggle, who made a surprise appearance in the bout but was eliminated in short order.

The final four participants were Knox, Finlay, Tatsu, and Ryder. Finlay and Knox brawled, while Ryder took the upper hand over Tatsu. Finlay capitalized on an assist from Hornswoggle and hoisted Knox onto his shoulders, but Ryder came up from behind and eliminated both men.

Tatsu hit Ryder with a clothesline that sent him cartwheeling

over the top rope to the apron, and then connected with a stiff roundhouse kick to the head that sent Ryder crashing to the floor.

THE WINNER: Yoshi Tatsu.

THE REAL WINNER: Yoshi Tatsu. Not only did the former ECW star get his hand raised in victory at WWE's biggest event of the year, but he did so with Hall of Fame countryman Antonio Inoki looking on. Tatsu's effort had to impress Inoki, who is arguably the most influential promoter in Japan today. If Tatsu ever decides to leave WWE and compete in Japan, Inoki is sure to open some doors for him. And with all of the Japanese media on hand to see Inoki inducted into the Hall of Fame, Tatsu's victory received strong coverage in Japan.

ANOTHER WINNER: Kung Funaki. He was able to remind the Japanese press and big wigs that's he's still around, even though he rarely appears on TV.

YET ANOTHER WINNER: Jimmy Wang Yang. Ditto.

THE REAL LOSER: Zack Ryder. The former "Edge-head" had the opportunity to win the match and get his floundering Raw run back on track, but he once again came up short. He's in danger of losing his credibility entirely, and he squandered a major opportunity to right the ship.

Historically, the super heavyweights have held an advantage in battle royals. In this bout, the smaller wrestlers acted in consort, targeting the bigger guys early on.



Photo by George Napolitano

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

Photo by George Napolitano



TAKE A BOW, YOSHII

Yoshi Tatsu soaks up the cheers of 72,219 fans, the largest crowd he's ever performed in front of. Maybe WWE should consider an annual WrestleMania battle royal, with the winner guaranteed a spot on the televised portion of the card the following year.

WRESTLEMANIA

ARIZONA 3.28.2010

THE MIZ & THE BIG SHOW VS. R-TRUTH & JOHN MORRISON (Unified Tag Team Title Match)

WHAT HAPPENED: The Unified tag team title was on the line as champions The Miz and The Big Show ("Show-Miz") took on two of Smackdown's most popular stars. Though John Morrison and R-Truth had not been teaming for long, they displayed a surprising amount of teamwork and timing and worked together like seasoned partners.

Morrison and R-Truth started quickly, double-teaming Miz and exchanging quick tags that kept him reeling. But the high-octane fan favorites made a tactical error when R-Truth attempted a flying crossbody-block on Show. Show caught R-Truth in mid-air, then tossed him across the ring with a jarring fall-away slam.

Perhaps looking to unveil a WrestleMania moment of his own, The Big Show began scaling the ropes, as if he were about to execute a moonsault, but a kick from Morrison brought the big man back down to the mat. R-Truth made the tag to Morrison, who unloaded on his former partner, The Miz. Morrison bounced up the ropes for a corkscrew moonsault, but Show pulled his partner to safety, causing Morrison to crash into the mat.

Miz grabbed Morrison and set up for his skull-crushing finale finisher, but Morrison blocked the move. Miz reeled back, allowing Big Show to make the blind tag as Morrison hit the ropes for a springboard. Unfortunately for the "Shaman Of Sexy," he bounced off the ropes straight into a big right fist from Show.

THE WINNER: The Miz & The Big Show by pinfall in 3:23.

THE REAL WINNER: The Miz. The former reality show star promised that he and Show would retain the tag team title, and they did just that. He may be obnoxious, but Miz is proving to be capable of backing up his boasts. Show made the save and scored the pinfall, but Miz came away with bragging rights.

ANOTHER WINNER: The Big Show. Show dominated the match with ease and barely broke a sweat in the three-minute bout.

THE REAL LOSER: John Morrison. A year ago, the draft lottery broke up the team of Morrison and Miz by sending Morrison to the Smackdown brand. Most analysts figured Morrison would be the breakout star of

the two. Instead, Miz is carrying the U.S. and Unified tag belts. The loss to Miz at 'Mania was a very bitter pill for Morrison to swallow.



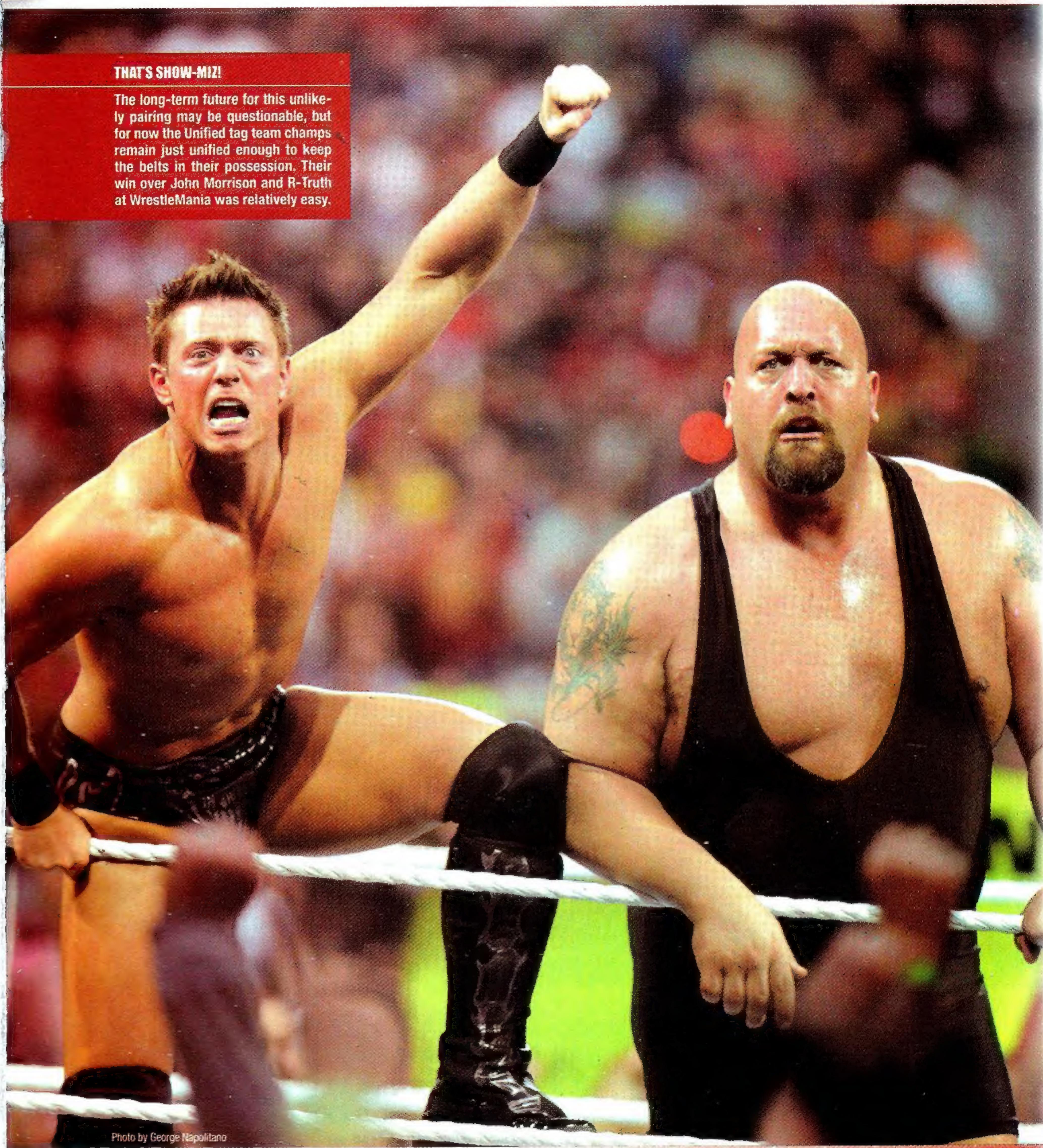
Photo by George Napolitano

Mistakenly thinking The Big Show is out on his feet, R-Truth vaults over the top rope for an attempted cross-bodyblock, only to be caught mid-air and slammed back-first into the ringpost.

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

THAT'S SHOW-MIZ!

The long-term future for this unlikely pairing may be questionable, but for now the Unified tag team champs remain just unified enough to keep the belts in their possession. Their win over John Morrison and R-Truth at WrestleMania was relatively easy.

Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

ARIZONA

3-28-2010

RANDY ORTON vs. TED DiBiASE JR. vs. CODY RHODES (Triple-Threat Match)

WHAT HAPPENED: The long-simmering animosity within Legacy finally came to a head at WrestleMania as Randy Orton squared off against his former partners Ted DiBiase Jr. and Cody Rhodes. Technically, the bout was a triple-threat match, with the first person to score a pinfall or submission being declared the winner. However, Rhodes and DiBiase cared more about punishing Orton, thus making it essentially a handicap match.

Rhodes and DiBiase circled Orton, looking for an opening. Rather than wait for the attack, Orton tore into Rhodes, knocking him from the ring to the floor. DiBiase caught Orton with a dropkick, and he and Rhodes began a methodical beatdown, stomping away at Orton and taunting their former leader. They connected with a double-suplex, then beat Orton back into the turnbuckles. Orton fought out of the corner, only to be taken down again by a clothesline from DiBiase. But when DiBiase went for the pin attempt, Rhodes pulled him off and tossed him from the ring. That dissension between DiBiase and Rhodes gave Orton a glimmer of hope.

Rhodes borrowed a page from the playbook of his former partner Bob Holly, flattening Orton with an Alabama Slam, but DiBiase thwarted the pin attempt. Rhodes and DiBiase argued, then began brawling. With Rhodes and DiBiase preoccupied, Orton was able to recover, knock DiBiase out of the ring, and begin working over Rhodes, hitting him with a bodyslam and a backbreaker. Orton stalked Rhodes, looking to hook an RKO, but DiBiase pulled Orton from the ring to prevent the attack.

Rhodes attempted a suicide dive to the floor, only to crash into DiBiase. As a groggy Rhodes and DiBiase climbed back into the ring, Orton caught both of them and hit a double-hanging DDT. Orton lined up and landed a vicious punt to Rhodes' head, then countered a Dream Street attempt into an RKO on DiBiase. Orton took the pin and stood victorious over his two unconscious former teammates.

THE WINNER: Randy Orton by pinfall in 9:02.

THE REAL WINNER: Randy Orton. Orton faced daunting odds but managed to thoroughly beat down both of his former Legacy partners and score a decisive win at WrestleMania. The win gave him a chance to stop spinning his wheels and put Legacy behind him so he can concentrate on the next phase of his career.

THE REAL LOSER: Randy Orton. Orton went into WrestleMania 25 as the reigning WWE champion and faced Triple-H in the main event. Just one year later, he was wrestling in a meaningless match at the bottom of the card. He may have won the match, but in the overall scheme of things, it was a match he should never have been in.

ANOTHER LOSER: Ted DiBiase Jr. We've been waiting for DiBiase to come into his own for a year now. He had the perfect opportunity to score a career-making win by pinning Orton at 'Mania. Instead, DiBiase got pinned and humiliated in a match where he enjoyed a two-on-one advantage most of the way. It was a disappointing performance, particularly since his father was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame the previous night.



Having disposed of Ted DiBiase Jr. (see feet at bottom right), Randy Orton delivers a picture-perfect flying dropkick to the face of Cody Rhodes.

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

LEGACY GOES BELLY UP

Randy Orton had a pretty good idea that this triple-threat would actually be a handicap match. But he also knew that if he were able to fight off his former partners long enough, they would eventually turn on each other. He was, of course, correct.

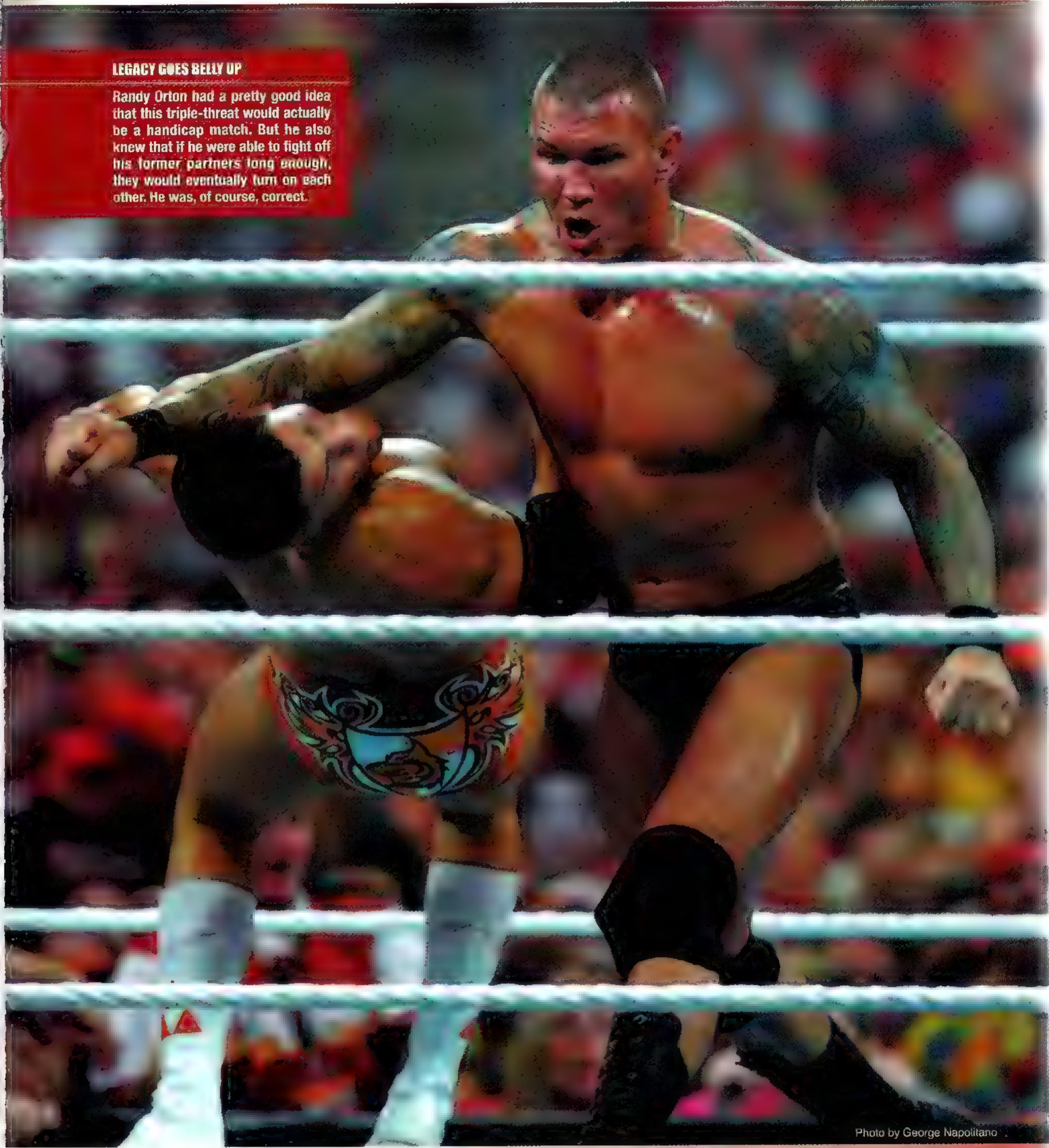


Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

**KOFI KINGSTON vs. MVP vs. EVAN BOURNE vs. DOLPH ZIGGLER vs.
JACK SWAGGER vs. SHELTON BENJAMIN vs.
DREW MCINTYRE vs. KANE vs. MATT HARDY vs. CHRISTIAN
(Money In The Bank Ladder Match)**

WHAT HAPPENED: The match opened as a free-for-all, with bodies spilling to the floor. Eventually Drew McIntyre and Kane were left alone in the ring. McIntyre was the first to try to climb a ladder, but Matt Hardy prevented him by tipping it over. The ladder was set up again and several wrestlers jockeyed for position, with Evan Bourne nearly grabbing the briefcase until being chokeslammed out of the ring by Kane.

Christian used the ladder as a weapon, blasting Hardy, then monkey-flipping Kofi Kingston into the ladder. Ziggler pulled Christian off the ladder and slowly tried to climb it himself, only to be stopped by MVP.

Kane returned to the ring and battered MVP, but Kingston, MVP, and Benjamin teamed up to attack Kane. Swagger used a second ladder as a battering ram to lay out several wrestlers, but Bourne flattened the ladder-wielding Swagger with an Air-Bourne double-knee strike.

Swagger made the mistake of going underneath the ladder, where he was pinned like a bug between two more ladders wielded by Hardy and Christian. In a decision he would come to regret, Bourne passed up an opportunity to grab the briefcase and instead launched a 450-splash from a ladder balanced horizontally from the ring ropes to a standing ladder. When he tried to scramble back up the ladder to get the case, he got Biel-thrown by Hardy from the top of the ladder to the canvas.

Kane gave up all pretense of winning the match and opted to torture Ziggler, placing Ziggler inside the ladder and repeatedly slamming it on him, eventually breaking the ladder in half.

In the most memorable spot of the match, Kingston grabbed the two halves of the broken ladder and tried to use them as stilts to reach the briefcase hanging above the ring. Unfortunately, his stilts left him about three feet shy of the case.

McIntyre was eliminated when Hardy tipped him off the ladder, crotcheting the I-C champ on the top rope. Hardy ascended the ladder but had trouble unlatching the case, giving Christian time to climb up and drop Hardy with an inverted DDT.

Christian and Swagger climbed opposite sides of the ladder and exchanged punches. As the ladder lurched unsteadily, Swagger grabbed the case and slammed it into Christian's head, sending him careening down. It took him 20 seconds to unhook the briefcase, but Swagger managed to get it done,

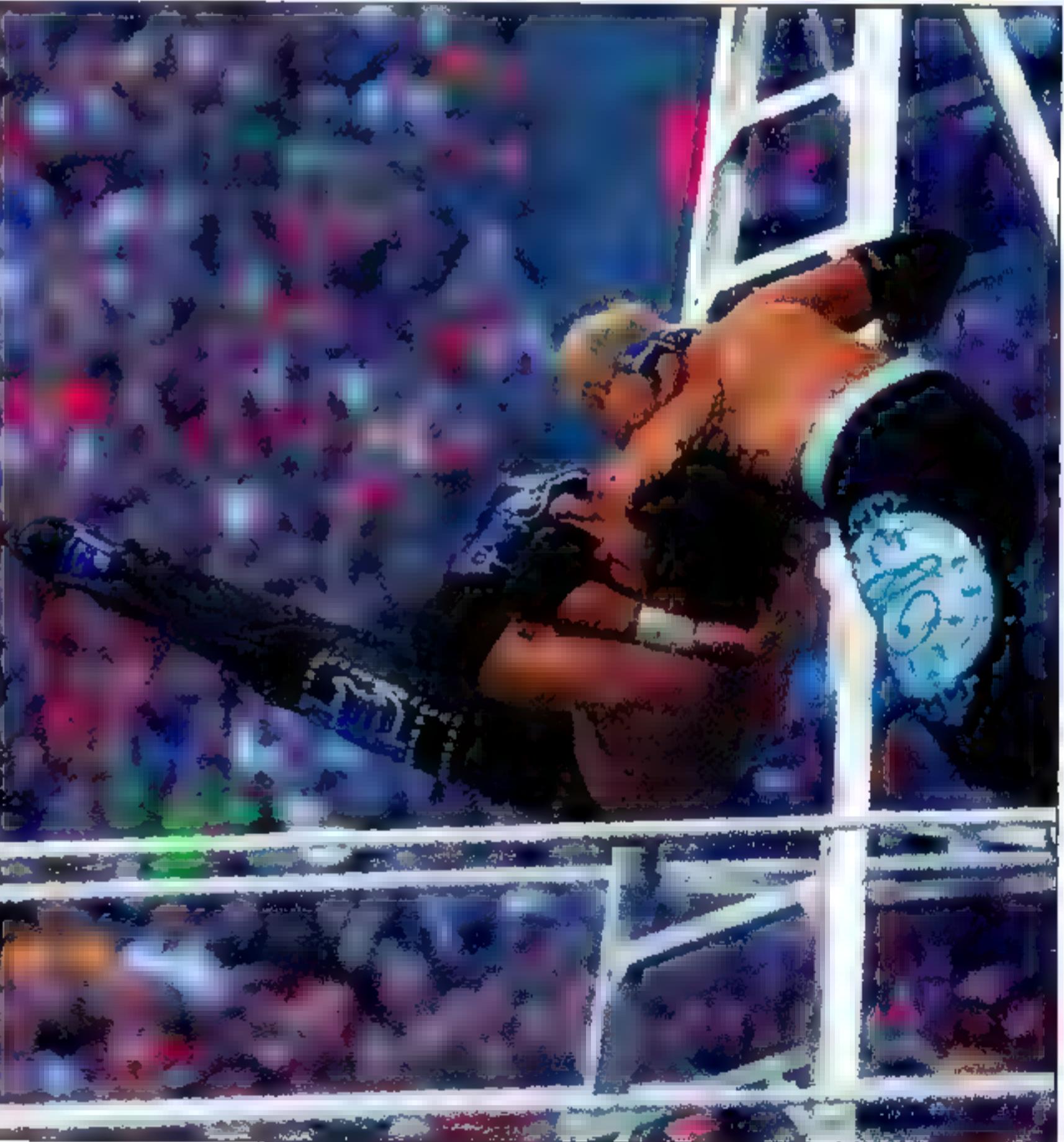
winning the Money in the Bank contract inside.

THE WINNER: Jack Swagger in 13:44.

THE REAL WINNER: Jack Swagger. Swagger had been slumping for months and desperately needed this win. Just two nights later, Swagger would cash in, surprising Chris Jericho for the World title. Considered a long shot by most, Swagger would use this match as a steppingstone to one of the most surprising title changes in recent memory.

THE REAL LOSER: Matt Hardy. He had his hand on the briefcase for more than 10 seconds and was unable to pull it down. A win in this match could have helped Matt contend for the World title, just as his brother, Jeff, did last year.

ANOTHER LOSER: Kofi Kingston. In the space of less than six months, Kingston went from a featured feud with Randy Orton to being a virtual non-factor in the MITB match. His star has dimmed dramatically.



Matt Hardy fumbled away the match when he couldn't unhook the briefcase and was sent to the mat by Christian's reverse DDT. Moments later, Christian would also be eliminated from contention when Jack Swagger slammed the case into his face.

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS



IT'S ALL MINE!

Having just received a lowly D-grade by PWI for his performance in the year leading up to WrestleMania, Jack Swagger outlasted a determined field to claim the top prize in the MITB ladder match. Two days later, he would cash in the guaranteed title shot and win the World title from Chris Jericho.

Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

ARIZONA

3.28.2010

TRIPLE-H VS. SHEAMUS

WHAT HAPPENED: The surly Dubliner awakened a sleeping dog when he jumped Triple-H and publicly challenged the 13-time former champion in the weeks leading up to this bout. For Sheamus, a clash against "The Game" was an opportunity to prove his surprising WWE title reign wasn't a fluke. Triple-H found himself in the role of the legendary gunslinger called out by the newest desperado to ride into town.

Sheamus had no shortage of confidence and tried to intimidate HHH by going nose-to-nose with him. It didn't work. Triple-H backed Sheamus into a corner and slapped him hard across the face, showing little respect for the former champion.

Insulted by the slap, Sheamus charged Triple-H and nearly got caught with a Pedigree before rolling to the floor to regroup. Triple-H followed Sheamus to the floor, where Sheamus took the upper hand, Irish-whipping the veteran into the ring steps. Back inside the ring, Sheamus weakened Triple-H with a powerslam.

Sheamus slowed the pace of the match, using his size and strength advantage to work over Triple-H's back and ribs. He hit a pair of Irish Curse backbreakers and applied an armbar. HHH rallied with a back suplex and hit a DDT, but again proved to be unable to maneuver Sheamus into position for a Pedigree. Triple-H worked Sheamus back into the turnbuckle and set up on the top rope, possibly positioning Sheamus for a superplex attempt. Sheamus countered the move and hoisted Triple-H up for his Celtic Cross Razor's Edge variation, but HHH slipped from his grasp.

Triple-H may have been able to elude Sheamus' pet finisher, but he couldn't evade a vicious bicycle kick that sent him crashing to the mat, seemingly unconscious. However, Sheamus was only able to score a two-count. Triple-H rallied back to his feet and regained control of the match with a jarring spinebuster. Sheamus kicked out of the subsequent pin attempt and then leveled HHH with a second bicycle kick that seemed to have sent "The Cerebral Assassin" to dreamland.

Instead of going for the immediate pin, Sheamus made the rookie mistake of pausing to enjoy the moment and to antagonize the capacity crowd in the University of Phoenix Stadium. By the time Sheamus decided to make his win official, it was too late. Triple-H had been playing possum. He

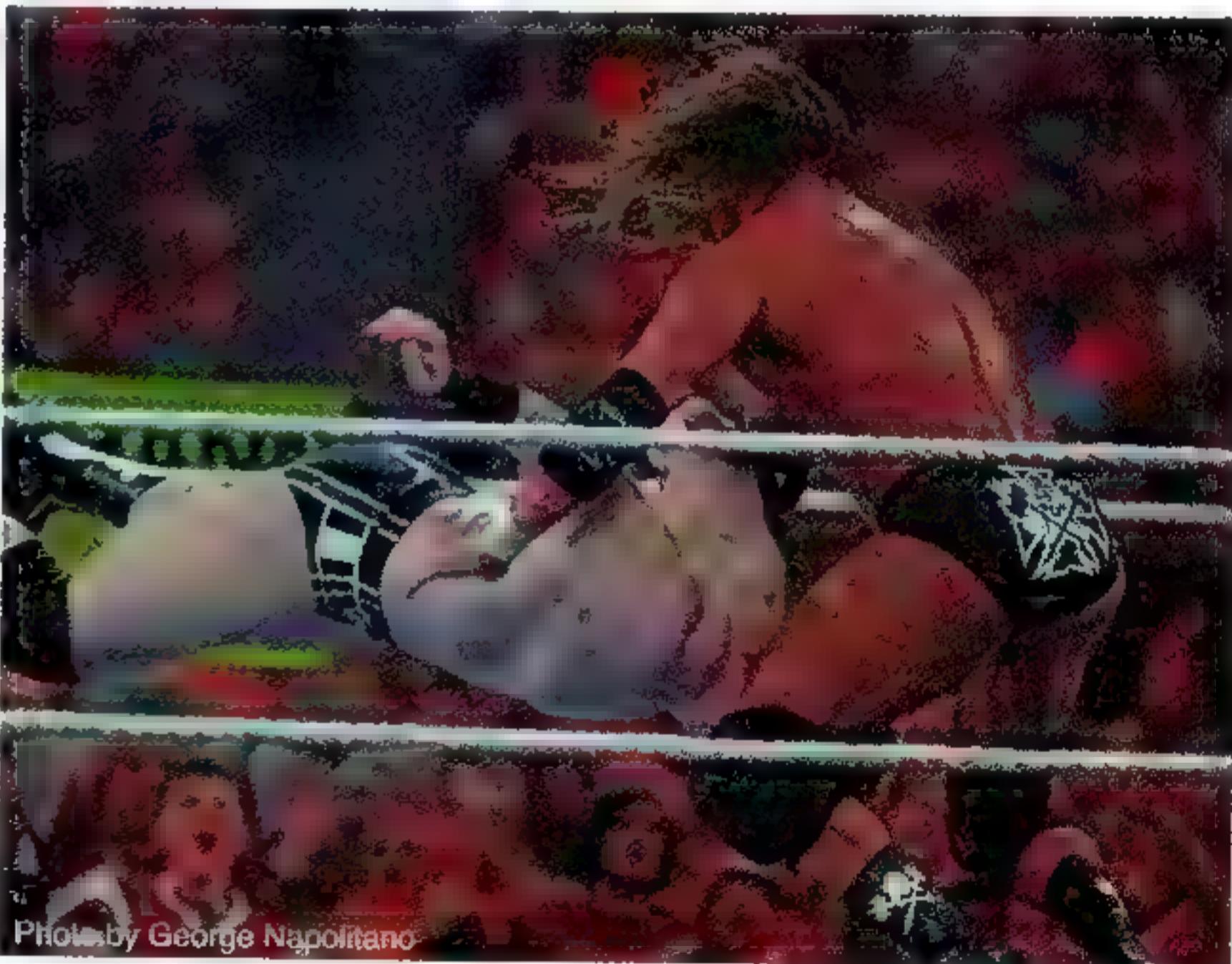
finally hit the Pedigree to take the win.

THE WINNER: Triple-H by pinfall in 12:17.

THE REAL WINNER: Sheamus. The pale-skinned Celt dominated much of the match and twice connected with his vaunted bicycle kick. Sheamus has been on the WWE main roster for less than a year and he managed to hold his own against a future Hall-of-Famer. He lost the match, but Sheamus won a lot of respect—including Triple-H's.

ANOTHER WINNER: John Cena. Sheamus managed to preoccupy Triple-H enough to keep him out of the WWE title match, which allowed Cena to focus entirely on Batista. Triple-H can be particularly dangerous when 'Mania rolls around. Cena had to be pleased once the HHH/Sheamus match was finalized.

THE REAL LOSER: Triple-H. WrestleMania 25 ended with Cena soaking up the spotlight and celebrating with the WWE title. Triple-H took a big step down the card and struggled against a relatively inexperienced opponent. He may not have let it show, but he had to be frustrated about being shut out of a world title match at WrestleMania. The last time he competed at WrestleMania without a world title on the line was way back in 2001, when he lost to The Undertaker at WrestleMania 17.



Triple-H had difficulty maneuvering Sheamus into position to execute the Pedigree, but once he did, there was nothing the Dubliner could do but lie on his back and watch the referee make his three-count.

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

H...H...HOORAY!

While this magazine may have labeled him a "loser" for not being involved in a world title bout at WrestleMania, that's certainly not the way Triple-H felt after disposing of one of the toughest newcomers to hit the scene in a long, long time.

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WRESTLEMANIA



REY MYSTERIO JR. VS. C.M. PUNK

WHAT HAPPENED: Rey Mysterio Jr. wasn't just looking to win this match. He was looking to retaliate against C.M. Punk for insulting him in front of his family and frightening his nine-year-old daughter, Aaliyah. Punk had crossed a line when he called Mysterio a coward and tried to provoke him into a two-on-one fight while his family was in the ring, and Mysterio was determined to ruin Punk's WrestleMania. According to the match stipulation, if Punk won the match, Mysterio would be forced to join the Straight Edge Society.

Both Punk and Mysterio showed up in Hollywood-inspired gear, with Punk wearing G.I. Joe-themed trunks and Mysterio wearing an Avatar-inspired outfit. But once the bell rang, neither man was in the mood for preening his new duds.

Punk attacked the moment the bell rang, battering Mysterio with kicks and forearms, and then whipping him into the corner. Mysterio bounded to the top rope, but Punk quickly countered, jostling the rope and causing Mysterio to fall backward, where he hung upside down with his heels hooked under the top rope.

Punk landed several kicks, then distracted the referee as Serena choked Mysterio from the outside. Punk missed a baseball slide and crotched himself on the corner post. As he sought a breather outside, Mysterio dove at him, but Punk caught him and dropped him face-first on the ringside steps.

Punk followed up with a sleeper, but Rey rallied and took down Punk with a springboard seated senton bomb. Mysterio went for a springboard bodypress, but Punk caught him with a powerslam for a near-fall. Mysterio attempted a flying headscissors, but Punk shrugged him off and connected with a stiff roundhouse kick to the head. Punk went for the quick cover, but Mysterio fought out. Punk tried to power Mysterio down to the canvas, scoring four near-falls in rapid succession, but he was unable to keep Mysterio down.

Again, Mysterio fought to his feet, and then dropped Punk with a scary springboard DDT. With Punk dazed, Rey went for the 6-1-9, but Punk caught him by the legs and maneuvered him into position for the Go To Sleep. Mysterio escaped, only to get caught in the same position again, and barely escape once more. Mysterio went for a frog splash, but Punk rolled away. Mysterio recovered and rolled Punk into position for a 6-1-9, but Serena jumped onto the apron to stand in Rey's way.

Punk took advantage of the distraction and went for the GTS again, but Mysterio reversed it into a hurricanrana, and then finally hit the 6-1-9. A big splash from the top rope made it official.

THE WINNER: Rey Mysterio Jr. by pinfall in 6:31.

THE REAL WINNER: Rey Mysterio Jr. The win over Punk was one of the most satisfying victories of Mysterio's incredible career. He looked crisp and on his game, and Mysterio's daredevil attacks and precision takedowns provided a jolt of electricity. His win was one of the feel-good moments of the night.

ANOTHER WINNER: Aaliyah. Rey's little girl was scared to tears when Punk interrupted her birthday celebration on *Smackdown*. When she saw her dad beat the bad guy, she was reminded that superheroes really do exist.

THE REAL LOSER: The Straight Edge Society. Obviously, Luke Gallows and Serena were upset by the outcome, but Punk was livid ... and they had to bear the brunt of his fury over the following weeks. You have to wonder if they're starting to question shaving off their hair and following a false prophet. Unfortunately for them, Punk is obsessed with avenging this loss, and the Straight Edge Society is going to be on pins and needles until he does.

ANOTHER LOSER: Darren Young. Young got stuck with Punk as his mentor for *NXT*. Not only does Punk barely want anything to do with him, but now that he's consumed with Mysterio, Young isn't likely

to get much help or attention from his mentor. Young needs help if he hopes to win *NXT*, and helping a rookie is the last thing Punk wants to do—unless, of course, Young can help him beat Mysterio.

Rey Mysterio Jr. drives his head into the solar plexus of C.M. Punk, momentarily taking his wind. Though brief, this match packed a tremendous amount of back-and-forth action.



THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

THIS ONE'S FOR YOU, AALIYAH!

Rey Mysterio Jr. salutes his admirers in Glendale, in particular a nine-year-old girl who weeks earlier had suffered psychologically at the hands of C.M. Punk and his Straight Edge Society. That girl, of course, is Rey's daughter.

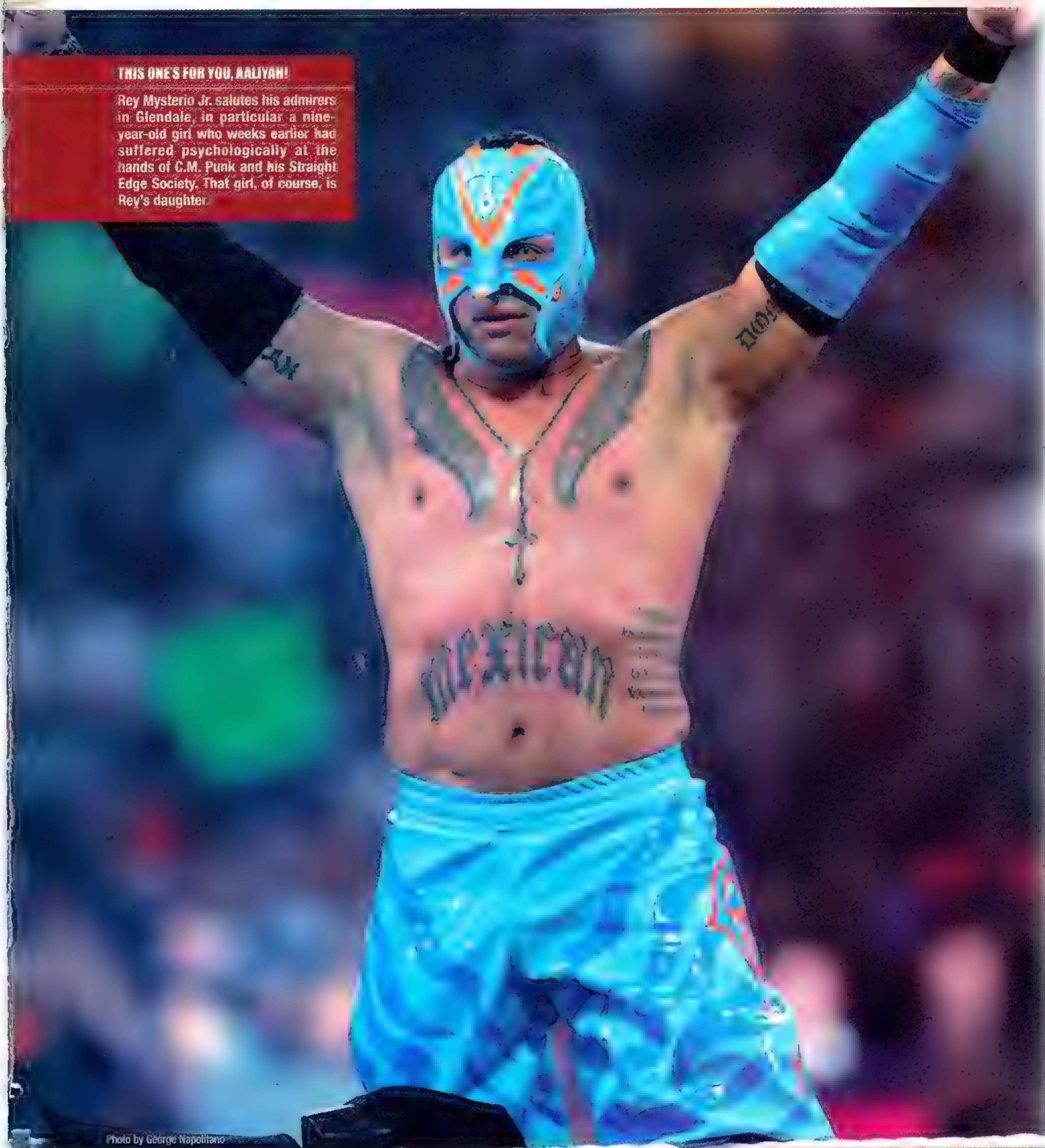


Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

BRET HART VS. VINCE McMAHON

WHAT HAPPENED: The match that took nearly 13 years to become a reality underwent plenty of twists and turns prior to bell time. First, Vince McMahon declined Hart's challenge. Then, after it appeared Hart had suffered a broken leg in a freak car accident, McMahon demanded the match. Once Vince finally put his John Hancock on a contract, Hart revealed his leg injury was a hoax, designed to lure McMahon into a fight against a "helpless" opponent.

The surprises didn't stop there. McMahon paused on the entrance ramp during his introduction and announced that Hart deserved "a WrestleMania-sized screwing." McMahon then announced that Hart's family (including The Hart Dynasty and Bret's brothers Smith and Keith) would serve as guest lumberjacks and that Bret's brother Bruce would be the guest referee. McMahon gleefully said he had paid off the whole family to double-cross "The Hitman."

As it turned out, Hart blood is thicker than McMahon money. Hart revealed that his family was still on his side, and that they had swerved McMahon. The WWE chairman found himself surrounded by enemies. There was nothing he could do but take a beating that was long overdue.

And what a beating it was. Hart floored McMahon with a single punch, much like he did backstage at the Molson Centre on November 9, 1997. "The Hitman" tortured McMahon for the next 11 minutes. McMahon tried to escape from the ring, only to take a beating from The Hart Dynasty, including a modified Hart Attack that sent McMahon crashing hard to the floor. McMahon managed to crawl beneath the ring and grabbed a crowbar that he used to fend off the lumberjacks. He climbed into the ring and tried to hit Bret, but "The Hitman" deftly eluded the blow and continued to beat on McMahon. Hart started to apply the sharpshooter, then decided he wasn't done administering his beating. He struck McMahon with the crowbar, rested in a chair for a bit, and then pounded McMahon with the chair. After several hard chair shots, Hart finally decided to put McMahon out of his misery. By the time he got around to applying the sharpshooter, McMahon couldn't tap fast enough.

THE WINNER: Bret Hart by submission in 11:09.

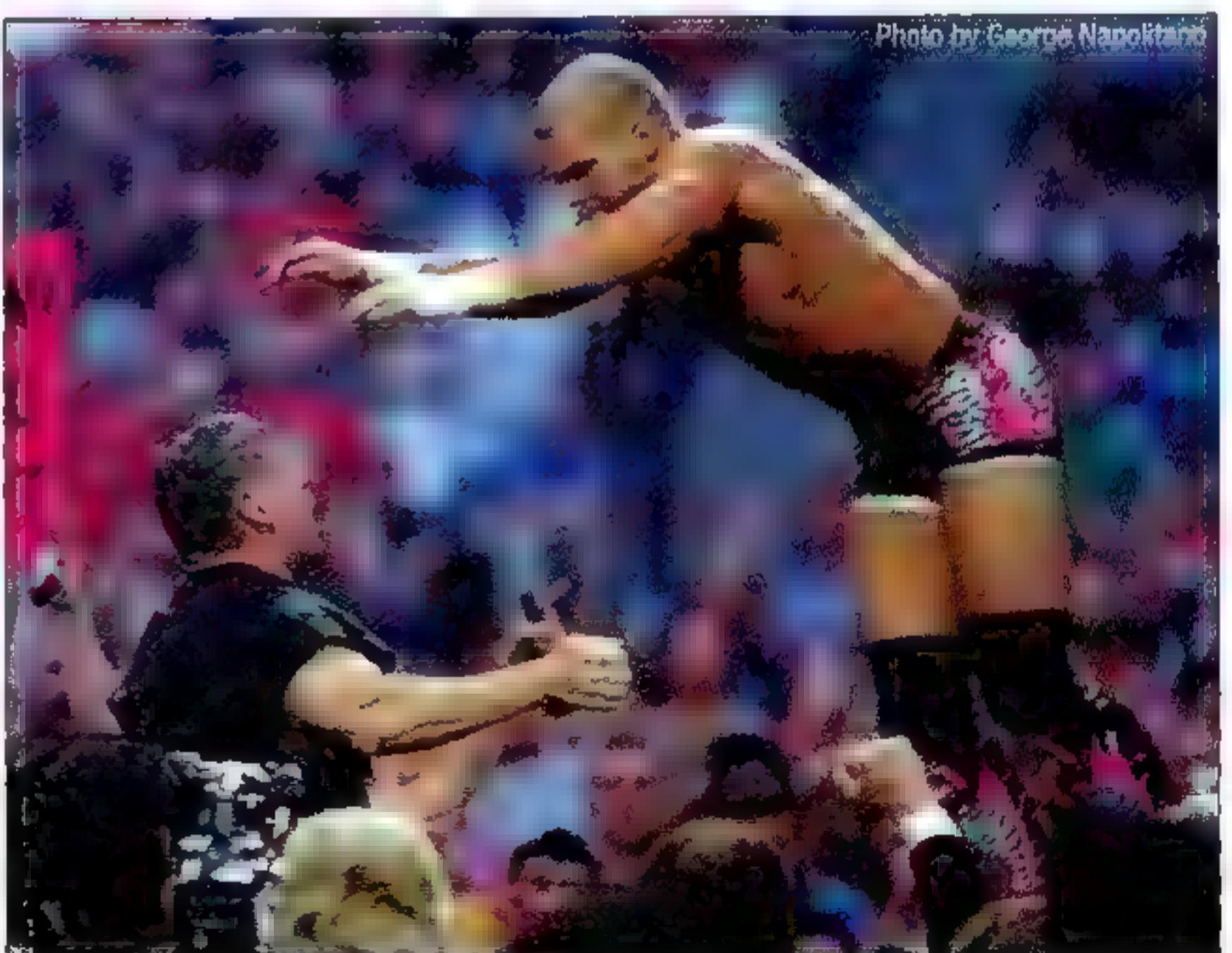
THE REAL WINNER: The Hart Family. The Harts have built a reputation as being wrestling's most famous dysfunctional family. The family has been plagued by bitter infighting that threatened to tear them apart. One thing they could agree

on, however, was that they all loathe Vince McMahon. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and the Harts managed to bury the hatchet ... right in McMahon's back.

ANOTHER WINNER: D.H. Smith, Tyson Kidd, and Natalya. The Hart Dynasty became fan favorites at WrestleMania, thanks to an endorsement from Bret. Hart gave the team his blessing, and that has done wonders for their reputation. It also put them in prime position to defeat The Miz and The Big Show for the Unified tag team championship.

ONE MORE WINNER: Vince McMahon. McMahon took such a one-sided beating that you couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him. In fact, he almost became a sympathetic character by the time the match was over.

THE REAL LOSER: Bret Hart. Bret may have savored the long-awaited blow off to his vendetta with McMahon, but "The Excellence Of Execution" had to be disappointed with the way the match came off. All the swerves took a lot of excitement out of the buildup to what otherwise would have been the most anticipated match in a long time. The match itself was a clunker. It was entirely one-sided and lacked excitement. Hart built a reputation as a man who could deliver the best match of the night. On this night, he delivered the worst. It's understandable that age and health problems have taken a toll, but Hart must be disappointed that his last match left such a bitter taste behind.



This is a move that Bret Hart would have loved to execute but no longer can. His surrogate, Tyson Kidd, would get the satisfaction (as would millions of others)!

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

CON-VINCED?

Vince McMahon could have gotten off relatively easy with a wad of spit and a punch in the eye after screwing Bret Hart 13 years ago in Montreal. This match was such a one-sided slaughter that one (not Bret, mind you!) almost felt a little compassion for the WWE chairman.



Photo by George Napolitano



EDGE vs. CHRIS JERICHO (World Championship Match)

WHAT HAPPENED: Edge promised that Chris Jericho would be on the receiving end of a spear at WrestleMania. His word proved to be good, but Edge would be unsatisfied with the result of the match.

After some back-and-forth action, Edge took control with a running shoulder block that knocked Jericho from the apron to the floor, where he crashed into the announce table. Edge followed up with a clothesline off the apron, then dragged the champion back into the ring and connected with a facebuster. The "Rated R Superstar" attempted a flying bodypress, but Jericho expertly rolled through the move for a near-fall.

Edge rushed a spear attempt and Jericho leapfrogged over him, then locked Edge in the Walls of Jericho. Edge managed to push up from the move and reverse it into a cradle, then caught Jericho with an Edge-cution for another two-count.

Jericho took over with a stiff elbow to Edge's head, then went for a spear of his own, but Edge countered with a high kick that sent Jericho reeling. Edge again attempted a spear, only to get caught by a Jericho Codebreaker. Surprisingly, Edge was able to kick out at two, and Jericho looked panicked.

Jericho attacked Edge's injured Achilles tendon, then reapplied the Walls of Jericho. Once again, Edge freed himself from the move. Edge connected with a running clothesline that sent both men to the floor. In desperation mode, Jericho grabbed the WWE World title belt, intent on using it as a weapon. Edge cut him off, but Jericho guillotined Edge on the ropes. As Edge fell backward, he collided with the referee. With the ref dazed, Jericho blasted Edge with the title belt, but he was still only able to score a two-count. One more Codebreaker, however, proved to be enough to end the match as Jericho successfully retained the title.

After the match, Edge attacked Jericho and set him up on an announce table. Edge then executed a running spear—jumping from one announce table to another—sending Jericho off the table and through the ringside guardrail. Edge got his spear, but Jericho kept his championship.

THE WINNER: Chris Jericho by pinfall in 15:47.

THE REAL WINNER: Chris Jericho. Few people expected Jericho to retain his title against Edge, as Edge had momentum on his side. Jericho had the spear well-scouted and found ways to avoid and counter Edge's pet move throughout the match. His

win served as a reminder of just how smart a wrestler Jericho is.

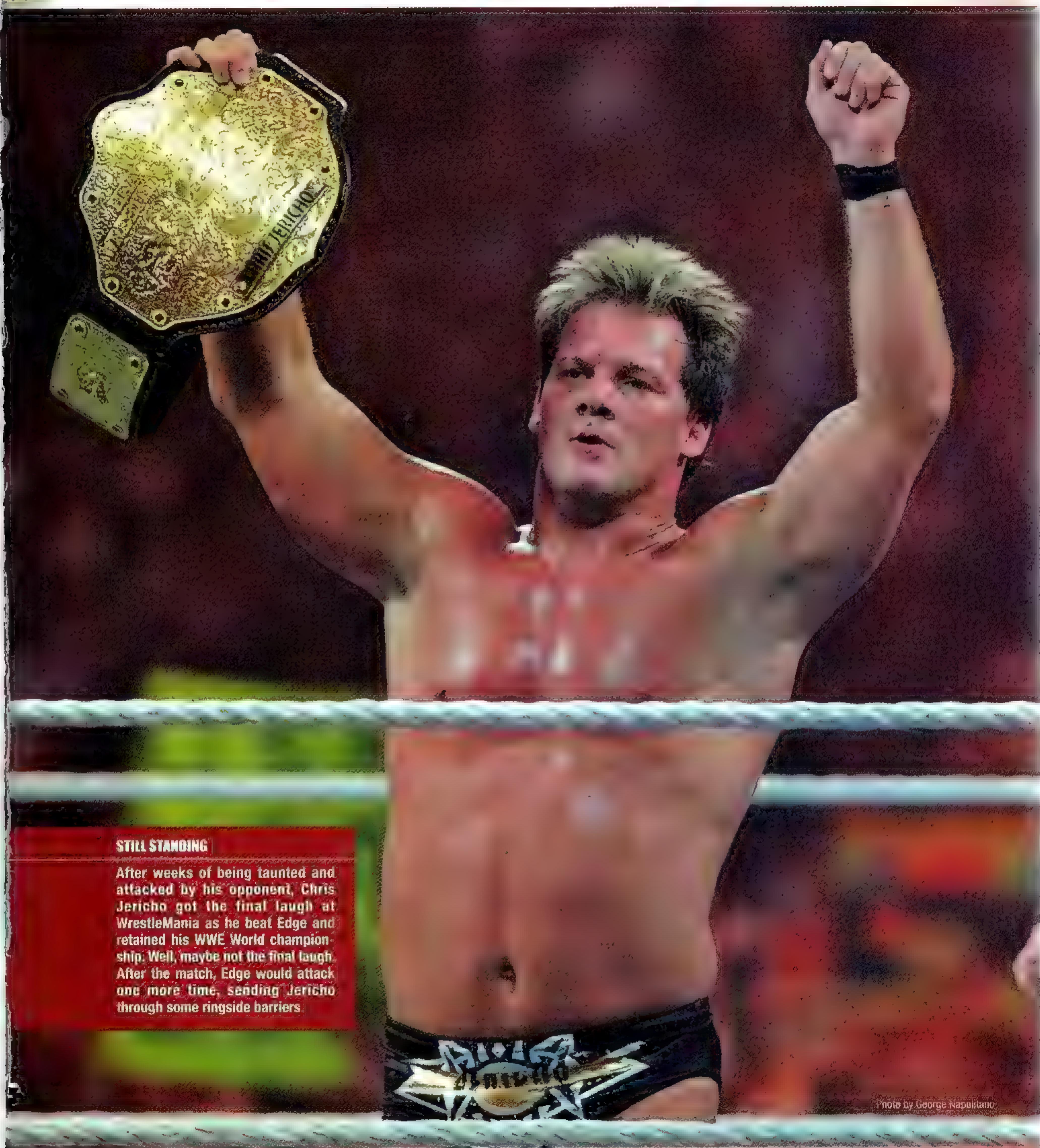
ANOTHER WINNER: Jack Swagger. Two nights after this match, Swagger would cash in his Money in the Bank shot and take advantage of the injuries Jericho sustained to take the World title. He let Edge do his dirty work for him.

THE REAL LOSER: Edge. Edge tried to play mind games with Jericho, convincing him that he would strike with a spear and end Jericho's World title reign. All he did was telegraph his best move and force it at inopportune moments. He could have won the match a variety of different ways, but he was so obsessed with landing the spear that he walked into Codebreakers and Boston crabs. To make things worse, he also had the audacity to complain when Swagger cashed in the MITB shot. Perhaps Edge forgot that he did the exact same thing four years ago, when he cashed in his MITB shot to take the WWE title from an injured John Cena. Edge was a victim of poor planning and bad karma.



Jericho had Edge well scouted coming into their championship match. His plan to work on Edge's tender Achilles worked to perfection. Multiple Walls of Jericho and Boston crabs helped Jericho leave Arizona with his reign intact.

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS



STILL STANDING

After weeks of being taunted and attacked by his opponent, Chris Jericho got the final laugh at WrestleMania as he beat Edge and retained his WWE World championship. Well, maybe not the final laugh. After the match, Edge would attack one more time, sending Jericho through some ringside barriers.

Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

MICHELLE McCOOL, LAYLA, MARYSE, ALICIA FOX, & VICKIE GUERRERO vs. MICKIE JAMES, KELLY KELLY, EVE TORRES, GAIL KIM, & BETH PHOENIX (10-Diva Tag Team Match)

WHAT HAPPENED: Neither the Women's nor the Divas titles were on the line in this 10-Diva tag team bout, but each woman was hungry for an opportunity to claim the pinfall and get her hand raised at WrestleMania.

The team of Michelle McCool, Maryse, Layla, Alicia Fox, and Vickie Guerrero squared off against a virtual female Dream Team in Beth Phoenix, Mickie James, Gail Kim, Eve Torres, and Kelly Kelly. The bout began with a major mismatch as Guerrero opened against Phoenix. Phoenix quickly took control, but Guerrero was able to tag out. The match quickly spiraled out of control as one woman after another entered the ring (either legally or illegally) and connected with her respective finishing move. After Phoenix dispatched Fox with a Glam Slam, she

turned her attention back to Guerrero, but McCool interfered, taking out "The Glamazon" with a high kick.

McCool and Layla directed Guerrero to the top rope. Guerrero did a version of her late husband Eddie's signature dance, then executed a version of the frog splash (which she would re-name the Cougar Splash a week later on *Smackdown*) onto Kelly Kelly. In her exuberance to score the pinfall, Guerrero accidentally lifted up Kelly's shoulder to break the count, but she recovered quickly and managed to collect the victory.

THE WINNER: Team McCool by pinfall in 3:19.

THE REAL WINNER: Michelle McCool. McCool exerted the most influence in this short, frenzied match and captained her team on to victory. By having non-wrestler Guerrero claim the win, she embarrassed Team Phoenix.

THE REAL LOSER: Eve Torres. Torres had been riding a wave of momentum leading up to WrestleMania. She had to be hoping she would be rewarded with a one-on-one match against Maryse at 'Mania, or at least that she could make a memorable showing in this match. Instead, she was all but overlooked. In a rematch the following night on *Raw*, she made sure that didn't happen again by pinning Maryse in less than 30 seconds. Two weeks later, Eve would be crowned the new Divas champion.

Michelle McCool was clearly the ring leader for her team and the overall driving force in the match. An early Faith Breaker to Kelly Kelly would be the perfect setup for the Cougar Splash Vickie Guerrero would land later to claim the win.

Photo by George Napolitano



THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS



EXCUSE ME!

Vickie Guerrero leaps from the top rope in what seems to resemble a frog splash. Though she may need a little work on her form, the move was effective enough to score the pinfall against Kelly Kelly.

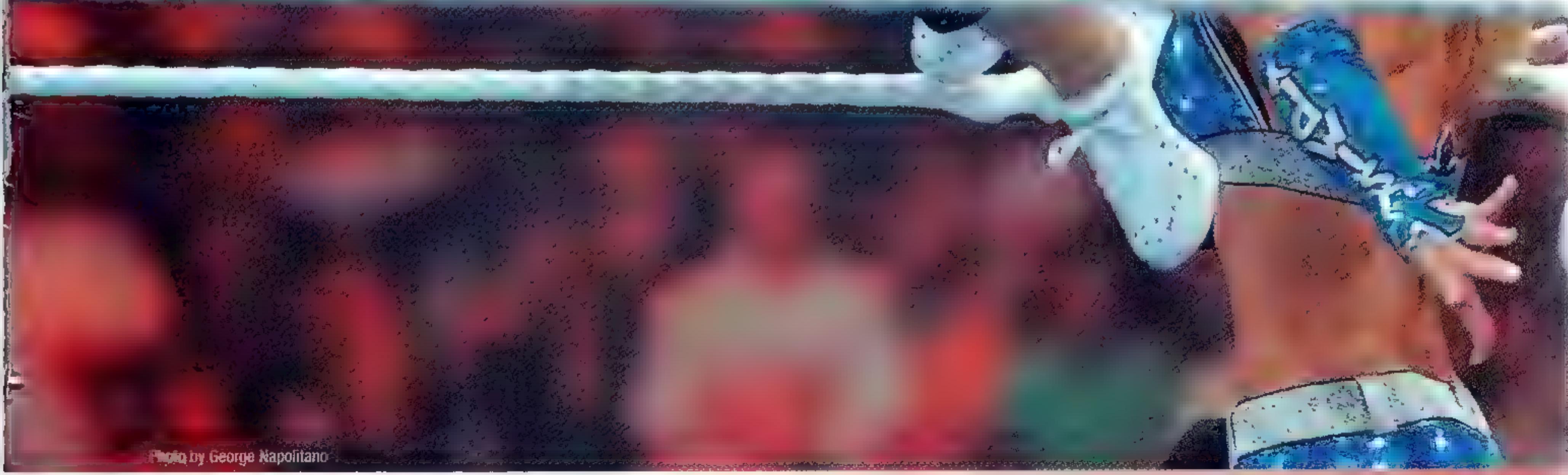


Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

ARIZONA

3.28.2010

BATISTA vs. JOHN CENA (WWE Championship)

WHAT HAPPENED: In the weeks leading up to this match, WWE champion Batista pointed to past encounters between he and Cena and claimed that every time they were in the ring together, something bad happened to Cena. The champion predicted not only that he would win the match, but that he would also seriously injure Cena in the process.

Cena made a spectacular entrance, being saluted by the Air Force Honor Guard drill team as he made his way to the ring.

Batista took the early advantage, using his superior strength to take control and then sent Cena to the mat with a jarring shoulderblock. Cena fought back with a series of punches, but Batista Irish-whipped him into the turnbuckle and landed a hard kick to his challenger's head. Cena managed to recover and floored Batista with a suplex. Cena tried to press his advantage with an Attitude Adjustment, but Batista slipped out and caught Cena with a dangerous DDT. With Cena feeling the effects of the spike DDT, Batista hooked in a sleeper and bodyscissors combination, effectively squeezing the air out Cena's lungs and cutting off the blood flow to his brain.

In a display of strength and willpower, Cena fought to his feet, with Batista still on his back. Batista hit a neckbreaker, but Cena rallied with a shoulderblock and sideslam. With momentum on his side, Cena went for a Five-Knuckle Shuffle, but Batista caught him with a spinebuster for a near-fall. Batista started setting up for the Batista Bomb, but Cena countered and hooked Batista in a STF, forcing the champion to seek the ropes. Batista connected with a spear, then tried to position Cena on the top rope for a power bomb, but Cena came back with a fist drop off the top rope. Once again, Cena attempted an Attitude Adjustment, but Batista reversed the move and landed a Batista Bomb. Not only did Cena manage to kick out of the ensuing cover, but the challenger finally managed to connect with his Attitude Adjustment, though he could only score a two-count.

Cena climbed the ropes, potentially looking to hit a legdrop from the top strand, but when he launched off the ropes, Batista caught him with a lethal power bomb. Somehow, Cena was able to recover from the move, and once again Cena locked Batista in the STF. This time, however, Batista couldn't crawl to the ropes and "The Animal" was forced to tap out.

THE WINNER: John Cena by submission in 13:30.

THE REAL WINNER: John Cena. Cena has had plenty of

sweet victories at WrestleMania, but this one had to be one of the sweetest. Not only did he force Batista to submit to win his ninth world title, he also got the 300-plus-pound monkey off his back. Batista had beaten Cena at SummerSlam 2008. Batista had beaten Cena at the 2005 Royal Rumble. Batista had also sent Cena to the hospital on several occasions. But on this night, Cena proved to be the better man.

ANOTHER WINNER: Sheamus. Though the burly Irishman was dejected from his loss to Triple-H, he must have smiled when he saw Cena get his hand raised. Sheamus has beaten Cena several times and genuinely believes he has Cena's number. He has a better chance to get a title shot against Cena than he did against Batista (especially given WWE's usual reluctance to pit two rulebreakers against one another). If he gets that shot, Sheamus might be considered a favorite to regain the title.

THE REAL LOSER: Batista. The big man came off as a whiner and sore loser throughout the build-up of the match and eventually tapped out, which didn't help his image. Batista

complained that Cena received preferential treatment from WWE, but when it came time to do something about it, he fell short. He's still being serenaded with chants of "You tapped out," and that makes him furious.

An early Attitude Adjustment wasn't enough to put "The Animal" to rest. Cena would need to wear down the big man more, before eventually getting him to tap at the 13:30 mark.



THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS



SALUTING A CHAMPION

John Cena had to be ecstatic when he saw Batista's hand slap the mat begging for release from the STF. It had been a long time coming, but Cena finally proved to be the better man—and on wrestling's greatest stage.

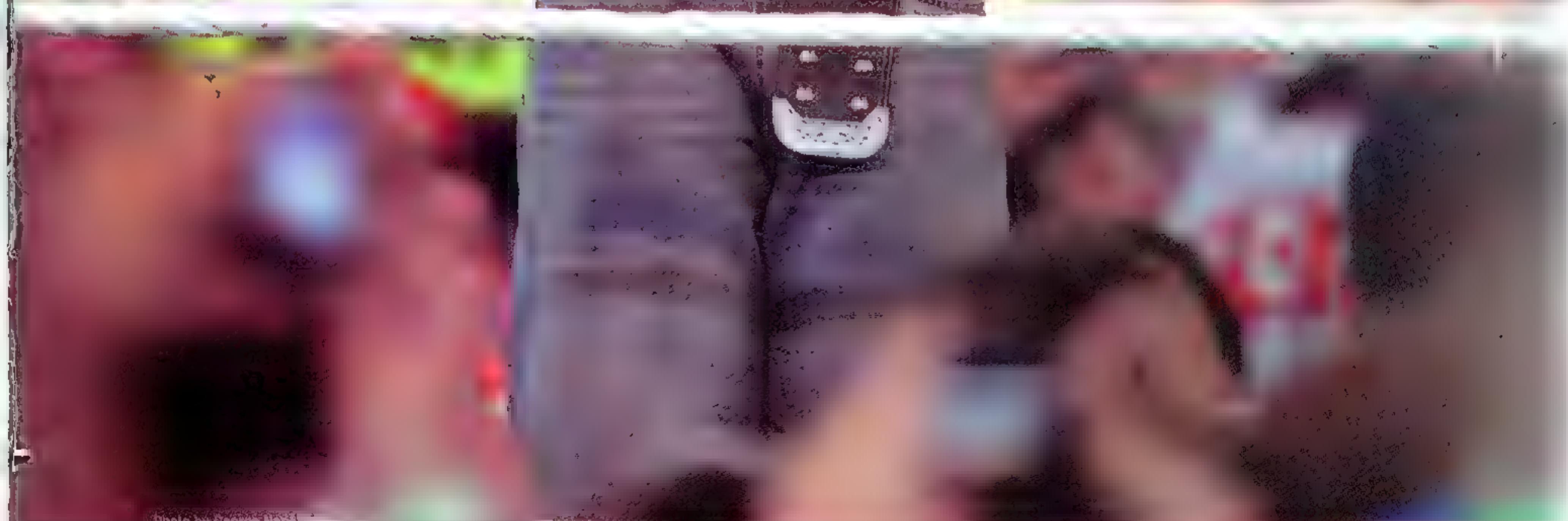


Photo by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA

THE UNDERTAKER vs. SHAWN MICHAELS ("The Streak" vs. Michaels' Career)

WHAT HAPPENED: Observers wondered if Shawn Michaels and The Undertaker would be able to live up to last year's Match of the Year, and the veterans responded with a match filled with action, intensity, and emotion.

Michaels relied upon his quickness to avoid the hard striking style of The Undertaker, and attacked with stick-and-move precision. When 'Taker was finally able to get a hold of Michaels, he tossed him into the corner and connected with a Snake Eyes drop, big boot, and a running clothesline. After connecting with the old-school rope-walking forearm, 'Taker went to end the match with a chokeslam, but Michaels escaped the follow-up pin attempt.

Michaels got 'Taker off his feet and applied a version of the Crippler crossface, and then targeted Undertaker's left knee, clipping the knee as Undertaker was going for a suicide dive to the floor. Undertaker tossed HBK to the floor and rammed his back into the steel post. Michaels attacked Undertaker's knee like a pit bull. He applied a figure-four leglock, but Undertaker powered his way out. Michaels landed a flying forearm and kipped to his feet, but Undertaker caught him by the throat and hit a big chokeslam for a near-fall.

Undertaker attempted a Tombstone, but Michaels countered with an anklelock, again focusing his attack on Undertaker's legs. As Undertaker went to the floor for a respite, Michaels attempted a springboard cross-bodyblock. It proved to be a terrible mistake. Undertaker connected with a Tombstone piledriver to the floor.

Michaels kicked out of the subsequent pin attempt, and got a lucky break when UT's knee buckled during a Last Ride attempt. Michaels went for an elbow off the top, but 'Taker raised his knees and caught Michaels in his Hell's Gate submission. Michaels countered the choke into a cradle, then landed a precision superkick. It wasn't enough to keep "The Dead Man" down.

'Taker hit a Last Ride, then threw Michaels to the floor. Michaels stunned 'Taker with Sweet Chin Music, which left him lying on the announce table. Michaels hit a moonsault targeting Undertaker's legs, but the breathtaking move took a toll on both men.

Michaels scored another near-fall with another superkick, but then Undertaker took over. "The Phenom" connected with a

chokeslam, followed by a Tombstone, but Michaels kicked out. Undertaker stood over Michaels as HBK weakly tried to climb to his feet. UT beseeched Michaels to stay down. Michaels responded with a slap to the face. Undertaker delivered yet another Tombstone, and Shawn Michaels' career was over.

THE WINNER: The Undertaker by pinfall in 24:06.

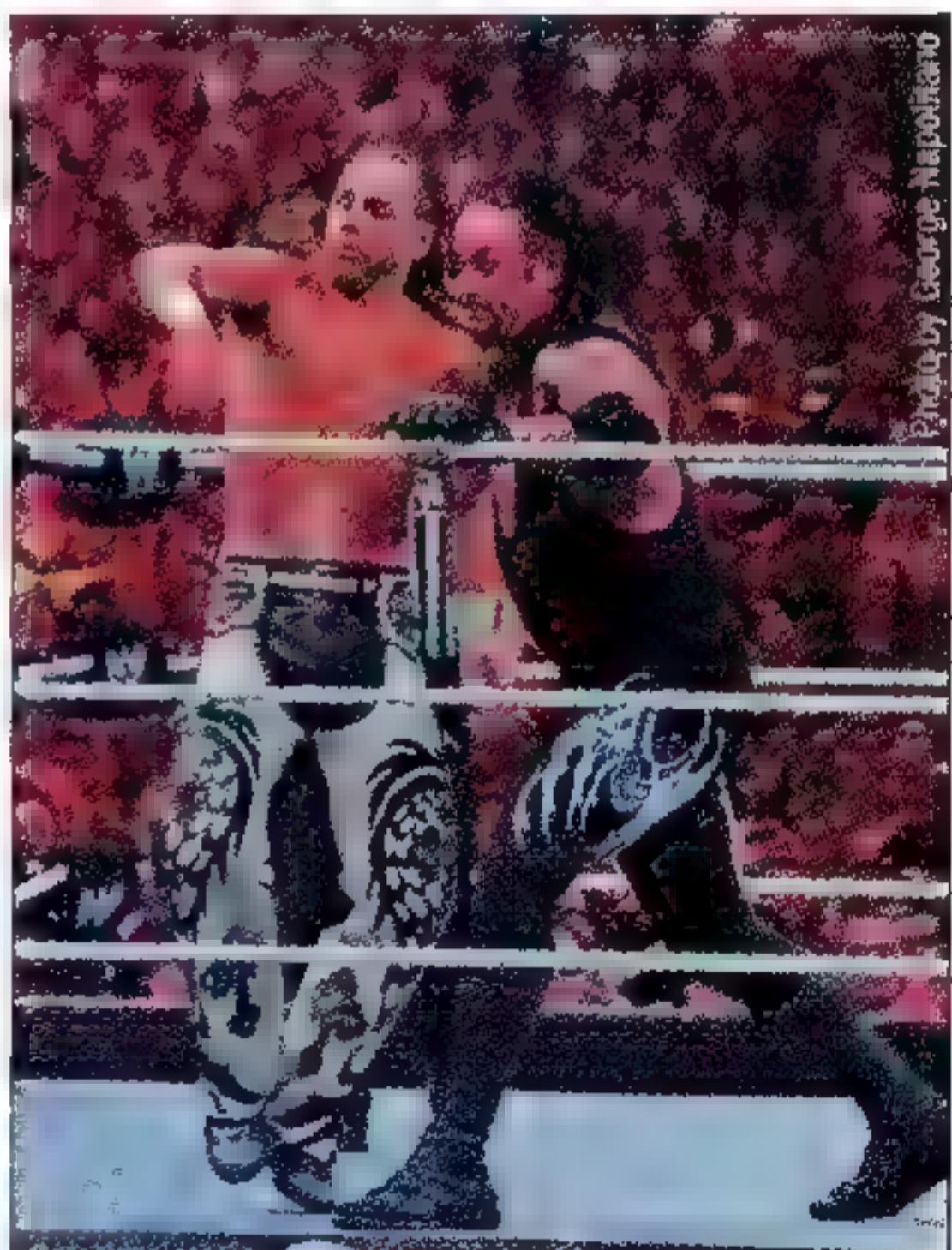
THE REAL WINNER: Shawn Michaels. Once again, Michaels stole the show at WrestleMania. He didn't win the match, but he received a hero's send-off, both from the fans in attendance and the fans at *Raw* the following night. Somehow, it feels right for Michaels to come out on the losing side of his final match. Even "The Dead Man" was obligated to tip his hat to "The Showstopper."

ANOTHER WINNER: Whoever faces Undertaker at WrestleMania 27. 'Taker has absorbed an incredible amount of punishment through the years, and the damage Michaels did to his legs in this match might affect him for the rest of his career. Michaels has softened him up ... now who will be able to take advantage of it and end the streak?

THE REAL LOSER: The Undertaker. He increased "The Streak" to 18-0, but at what price? How much longer can he take these types of physical beatings?

ANOTHER LOSER: The Smackdown brand. There are rumors swirling that Undertaker may take several months off to recharge his batteries. That deprives the Smackdown brand of its biggest star.

In a classic back-and-forth match, The Undertaker showed his veteran savvy by wearing down Michaels. Repeated trips to the corner helped place the "Heartbreak Kid" in the weakened state needed for 'Taker to land that final Tombstone for the victory.



THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS

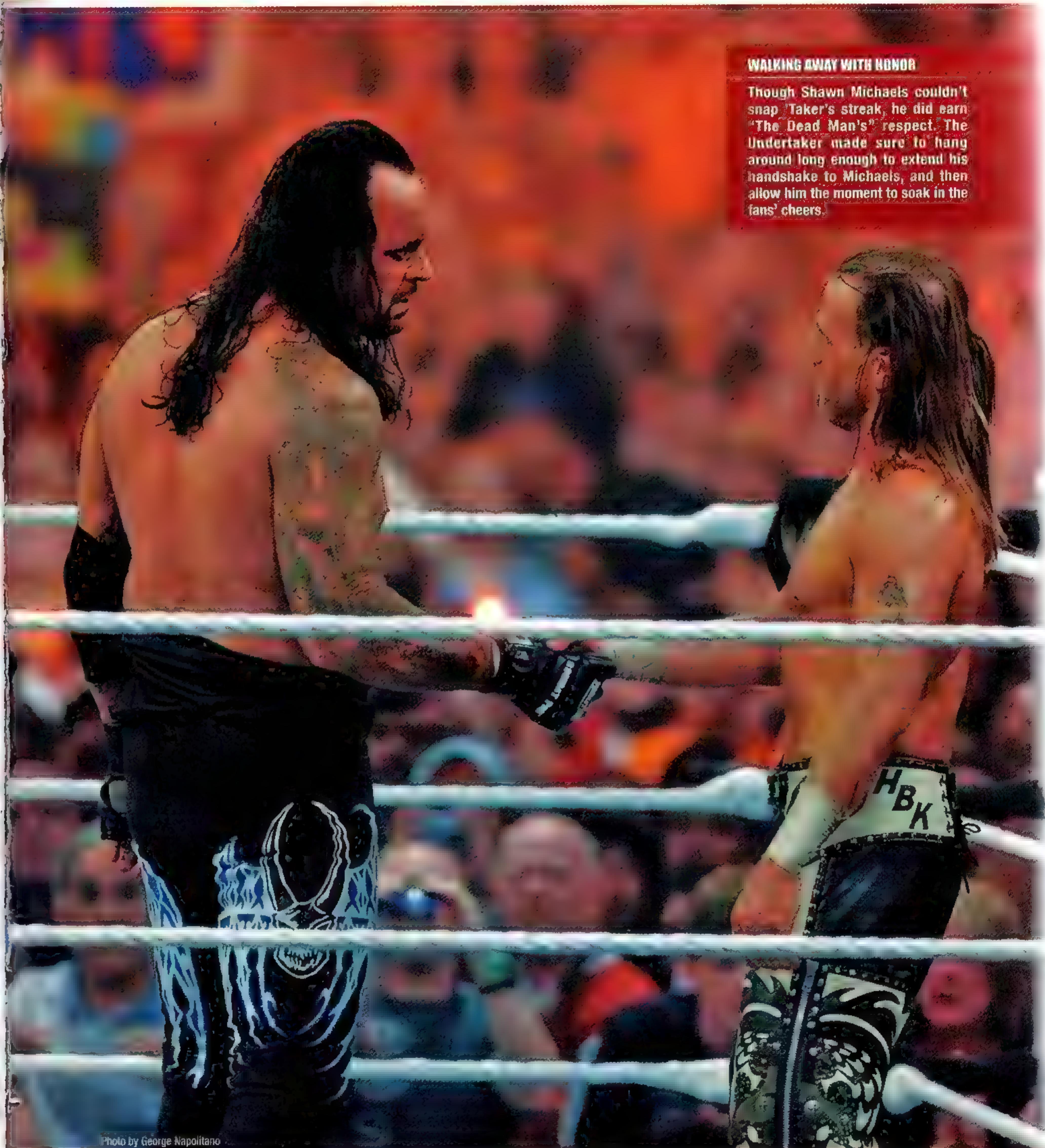


Photo by George Napolitano

WALKING AWAY WITH HONOR

Though Shawn Michaels couldn't snap 'Taker's streak, he did earn "The Dead Man's" respect. The Undertaker made sure to hang around long enough to extend his handshake to Michaels, and then allow him the moment to soak in the fans' cheers.

WRESTLEMANIA

WHITE HALL OF FAME

PHOTOS BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



Former Major Leaguer, announcer, and comedian Bob Uecker, Inducted by NBC Universal Sports Chairman Dick Ebersol, was enshrined in the Celebrity Wing of WWE's Hall of Fame for his work as a broadcaster at WrestleManias III and IV.



The scowl that was so often on the face of Maurice Vachon finally gave way to a smile when WWE feted the "Mad Dog's" career at the 2010 Hall of Fame ceremony.



Surrounded by relatives, Bret Hart stood in for his father Stu's posthumous induction. Vince McMahon may have thought twice about letting so many Harts in the building had he known what they'd do to him the next night at WrestleMania.

Legendary wrestler and promoter Antonio Inoki can't hide his happiness over being recognized by WWE for his tremendous contributions to the wrestling business.



Two old colleagues from the WWF's Rock 'n' Wrestling days reunited at the ceremony as Roddy Piper was chosen to induct former Women's champion Wendi Richter.



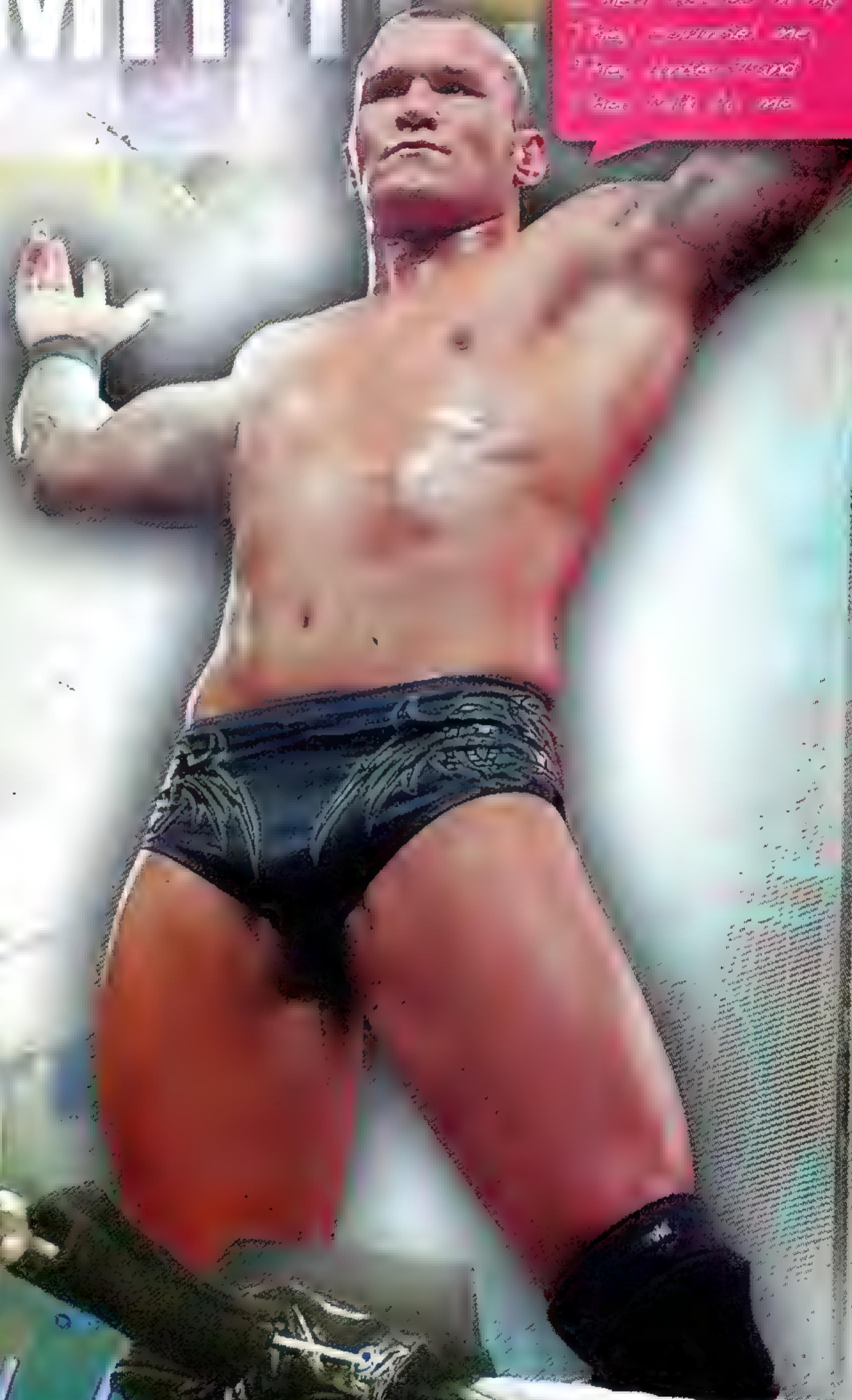
Flanked by his sons Ted Jr. and Brett, Ted DiBiase beams at his Million-Dollar belt as if he had won it for the first time. The two-time Million-Dollar champion was finally acknowledged for his career achievements.



Ninety-seven-year-old Betty Wagner attended the Hall of Fame ceremony to see her iconic husband, Gorgeous George, honored for his undying influence on professional wrestling.

HE'LL NEVER ADMIT IT

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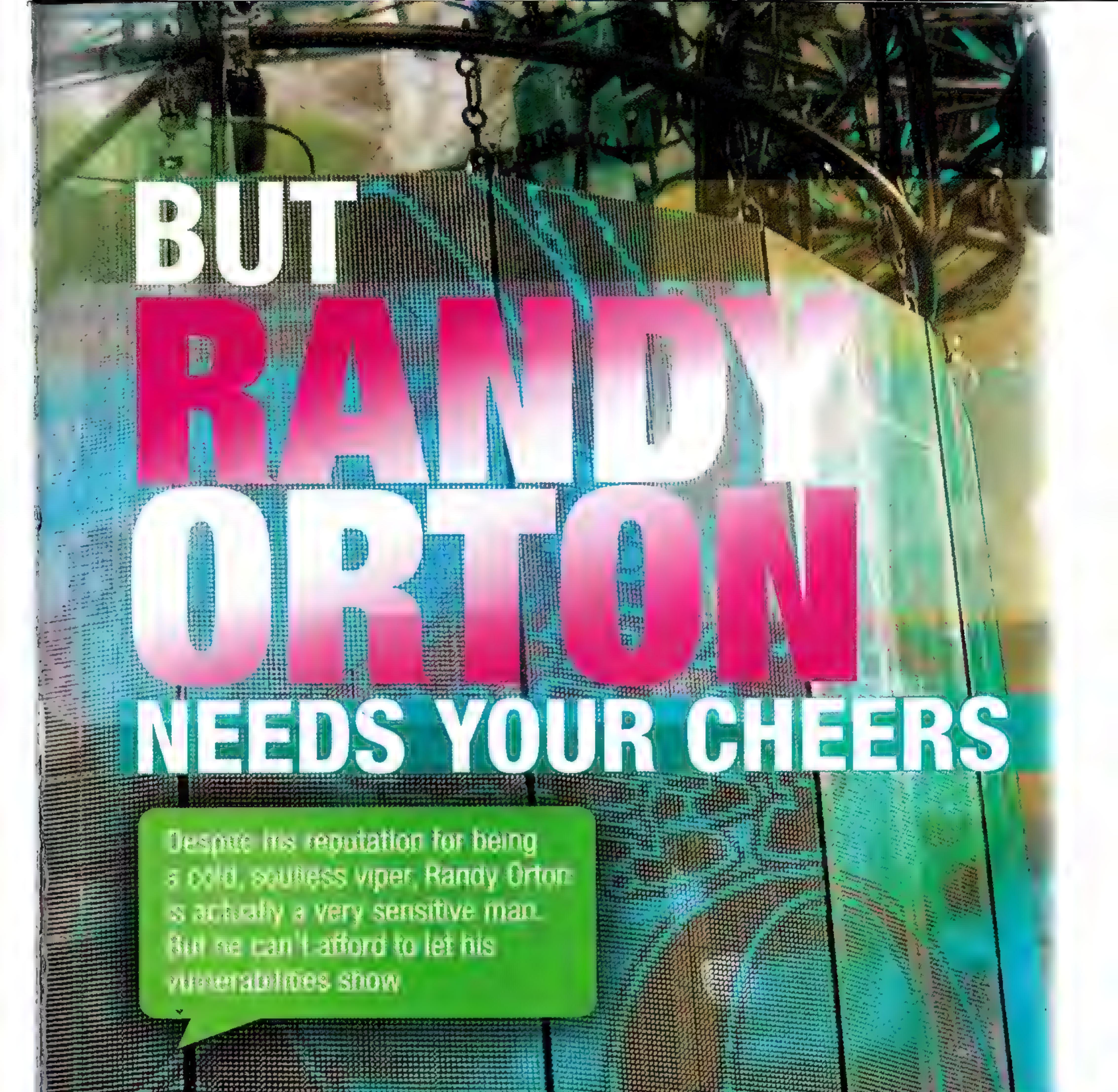


INSIDE WRESTLING

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Photo: R. Reaves

52



BUT RANDY ORTON NEEDS YOUR CHEERS

Despite his reputation for being a cold, callous viper, Randy Orton is actually a very sensitive man who can't afford to let his guard down.

BY DAN MURPHY

SIX YEARS AGO—before Legacy began, before the “Age Of Orton” dawned—Randy Orton was supposed to be the savior of WWE.

At 24 years old, he became the youngest world champion in

WWE history. After he cleanly defeated Chris Benoit for that championship, Benoit handed the title belt over to Orton and raised his hand, symbolically passing the proverbial torch on to the third-generation prodigy.

The following night, Orton was unceremoniously booted

out of Evolution, and endured a three-on-one beatdown from Triple-H, Batista, and Ric Flair. That attack turned Orton into a *de facto* fan favorite. He had won over the fans, but lost his allies.

It proved to be a lousy trade-off.

Within weeks, the anti-Orton backlash began. Critics said he was pushed too early, and that he was elevated to the WWE World title before he had truly proven himself. Orton didn't help matters, either. Stung by the rejection of his jealous Evolution partners, Orton enveloped himself in a new bravado that bordered on smugness.

In reality, his self-confidence was deeply shaken by Evolution's rejection. But to hide those fears, he became overconfident. Between the pressure of the championship, the critics, and his own gnawing fears of inadequacy, Orton cracked. He lost the title. He dropped in the rankings. He abandoned his fans. Outside the ring, he began exhibiting erratic behavior and was accused of harassing other WWE personnel and acting up in hotels. Inside the ring, he became a self-appointed "Legend Killer," and took a sadistic pleasure in violently attacking former stars, just as Evolution had attacked him in the most traumatic episode of his wrestling career.

All of this is old news, of course. But Orton is once again standing at a critical crossroads of his career. And to understand which direction he chooses to go, it is essential to understand how he got here.

Dr. William G. has never met Randy Orton. He has never questioned him, examined him, or tested him. All he knows of Orton is what he sees on television and reads in magazines such as this one. Without having examined him in person, Dr. G. says it would be unethical for him, a licensed psychologist, to offer any kind of diagnosis on Orton's mental state.

However, Dr. G. says Orton's actions might indicate a personality disorder, such as intermittent explosive disorder (which he claimed to have last year, then

said he didn't) or perhaps some kind of other personality disorder.

"This is pure speculation on my part and not a medical finding," (which is why Dr. G. has asked that his last name not be used) Dr. G. said. "He seems to have an inflated sense of self-importance, though that is far from uncommon in his line of work. He responds to criticism or adversity with rage and fury. He manipulates other people to achieve his own ends. He is obsessed with fantasies of success, power, and greatness. He seems unable to forge lasting friendships. He has an extreme preoccupation with himself and seems unable to feel any sort of empathy for other people at all."

We asked the doctor what happens when a person who relies on taking advantage of other people to achieve his own goals ends up without friends or allies, having alienated everyone close to him and proven himself to be untrustworthy.

"He will find someone else to befriend," Dr. G. said. "He will use them and continue the same pattern of exploitation. He has a

deep-seated hunger for adulation, and he will find someone to adore him. He needs adoration."

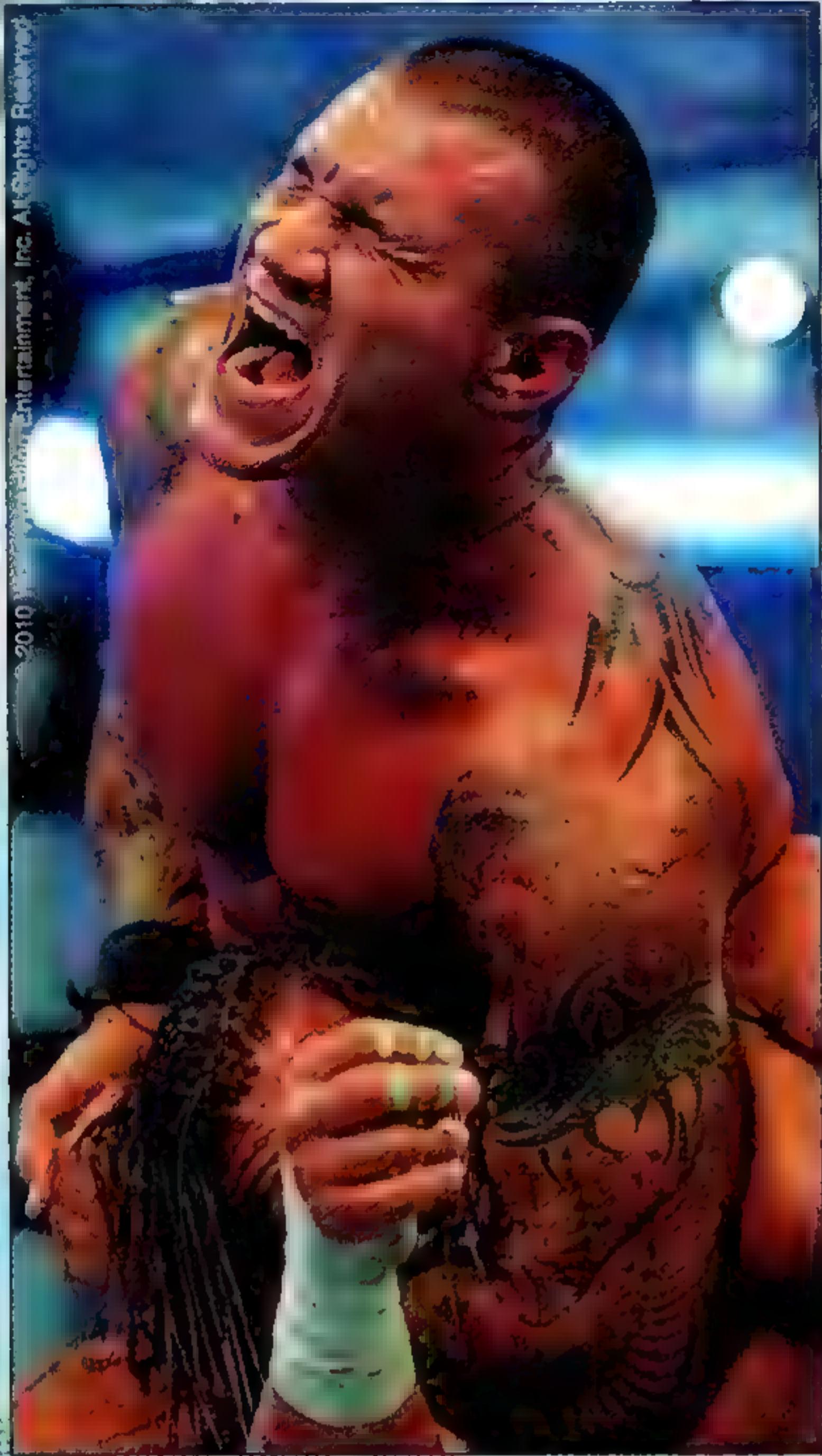
Cindy S. lives in Mechanicsville, Iowa, about an hour-and-a-half away from Moline, Illinois. She and her husband, Mitchell, have driven to Moline to see a Raw event. Cindy is wearing an RKO football jersey she had bought at the merchandise stand. Mitchell is carrying a sign that reads "WWE Champion Orton ... As Inevitable As Death And Taxes."

Orton pins WWE World champion Jack Swagger in a non-title bout that evening, and Cindy is jubilant. "If Orton beats Swagger with the belt on the line," she says, "he can bring the World title back to Raw and unify it with the WWE title. He's already proved he can beat both Cena and Triple-H. Who could stop him?"

Orton receives a lusty ovation from the capacity crowd at the I Wireless Center in Moline, just as he has in cities across the country over the past few months. Orton isn't exactly kissing babies



Possibly stemming from his treatment at the hands of those he formerly trusted, Orton has begun a trend of belittling those closest to him. Starting with Ted DiBiase Jr. and a strong tongue lashing in front of the entire Raw audience.



Normally calm and collected, Orton has allowed his temper to get the best of him at times. Is it this raw emotion that drives Orton's need to have sycophants around him? With no one currently by his side, he'll need the fans' support to get him back to world title contention.

and politicking for popularity, but he's slowly winning over more and more fans. In fact, he may be more popular now than he was back in 2004, when he was thought to be the marquee hero who would carry the company into the new millennium.

Even from the cheap seats, you can see the expression on Orton's face.

He's smirking.

"You never really get over being betrayed."

Three years ago, Steve S. started a small upscale bistro with two partners. Old friends from college, the three had worked in res-

taurants and decided to open one of their own. But while they were each good cooks and hard workers, they constantly butted heads about the way the restaurant should be run and how menu items should be priced. The pressures of business turned the three friends against one another. One day, Steve arrived at the bistro to find that the locks had been changed and that his partners had forcibly bought out his shares of the company. The matter wound up in court.

"When the people you trust the most turn on you, that shakes you to the core," Steve said. "At first, I was just furious. I wanted to destroy my former partners and just run them right out of business. Then I began second-guessing myself. I wondered if I had brought it all on myself. I wondered if I had been unreasonable, or whether I just wasn't good enough to succeed at that level."

"There were some days where I just didn't get out of bed at all; I was in a very dark place," Steve continued. "I never, ever want to go through something like that again. It's business, but it still hurts."

Randy Orton has been betrayed twice—once by Evolution and once by Legacy. If anyone could empathize with Steve, it would be Randy.

Dr. G. describes Randy Orton as a manipulator with an inflated sense of importance and a pro-

pensity for violence.

Cindy and Mitchell describe Randy Orton as a superior wrestler and one of the most exciting and dynamic talents in the world.

Steve S. describes Randy Orton as a man trying to pick up the pieces of shattered friendships and seeking reassurance that he can bounce back from adversity.

All of them are correct.

Orton is a complex person. He yearns for acceptance, yet he abuses the people closest to him (such as Ted DiBiase Jr. and Cody Rhodes). He has been known to attack people—both friend and foe—without provocation. He is becoming a popular fan favorite, though his wrestling style has changed little from a year ago when he was the most despised man in WWE.

For the first time in years, Orton doesn't have someone in his corner watching his back. Evolution isn't there. His father, Bob Orton Jr., isn't there. Rhodes and DiBiase aren't there.

But the fans are. And as long as the cheers from the fans can fuel Orton's craving for adulation, and can help him quiet those nagging voices in his head that question his own self-worth, Orton will seek them out. He'll never acknowledge how important the fans have become to him; to do so would detract from his own inflated opinion of himself. But without the embrace of the fans, Orton would flounder, desperately searching for someone to massage his massive yet delicate ego.

Perhaps the fans have the power to help Orton overcome his narcissism. Perhaps they can teach him empathy and help him develop a healthy sense of confidence and worth. Or maybe Orton will alienate his fans and explode in violent rage, as he has done so often in the past.

The only ones who know for sure are those voices in Orton's head.

Eric Young

"I've always been serious about this business."

IN HIS SIX-PLUS years in TNA Wrestling, Eric Young has gone through numerous transformations. From a supporting player in Team Canada to the leader of the World Elite and from the comedic Super Eric to the intense competitor we see today, Young has made his image over several times, switching back and forth between heel and fan favorite roles. In showing his adaptability, he has emerged as one of the mainstays in a promotion that has undergone major changes.

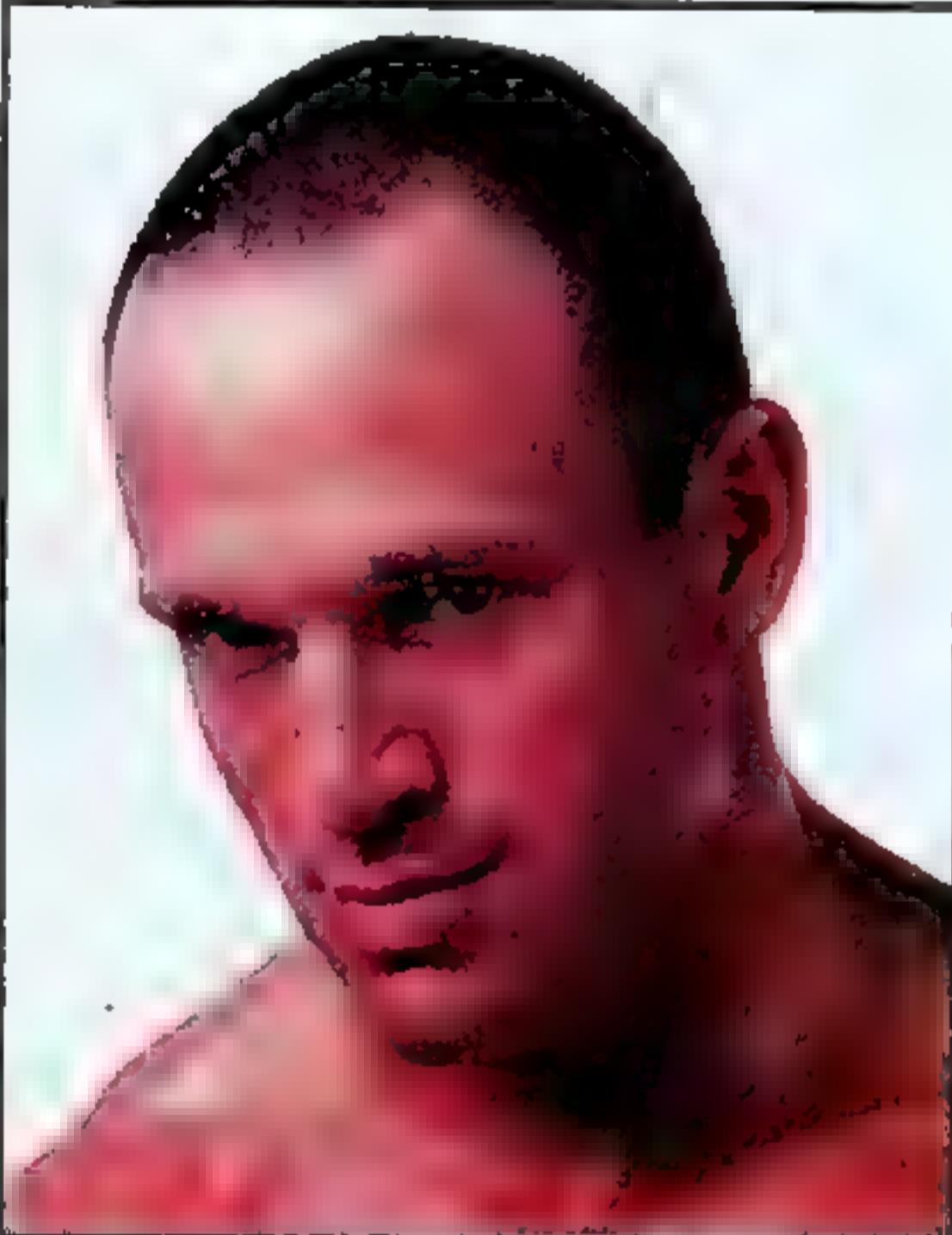
Recently, Young has stepped forward as one of the major players in leading the opposition against The Band (the remnants of the once-dominant New World Order of WCW infamy). Refusing Kevin Nash's offer to join the group, Young has been a thorn in their side ever since.

Although he is now once again entrenched as a fan favorite, Young has maintained—and even built upon—the aggressive approach in the ring he adopted when he shed his comedic image to become a rulebreaker.

In perhaps his most memorable display of in-ring athleticism on *Impact* to date, Young recently executed a beautiful elbow drop off the top of a steel cage that drew oohs and ahs from even jaded fans that have come to expect daredevil maneuvers in wrestling.

Taking a break from his busy

schedule, Young recently sat down with Contributing Writer Bill Meltzer. Young discussed his campaign to rid TNA of The Band, the newfound respect he's gained as a "serious" competitor, and his views on the shifting landscape in TNA.



"My ultimate goal has always been to get to where I'm at right now, and hopefully beyond that in the future."

Q: Eric, so far your battles with The Band have pretty much been a stalemate. You've teamed with Jeff Hardy and Rob Van Dam to beat the group in a steel cage match, but lost a controversial match to Kevin Nash. You've

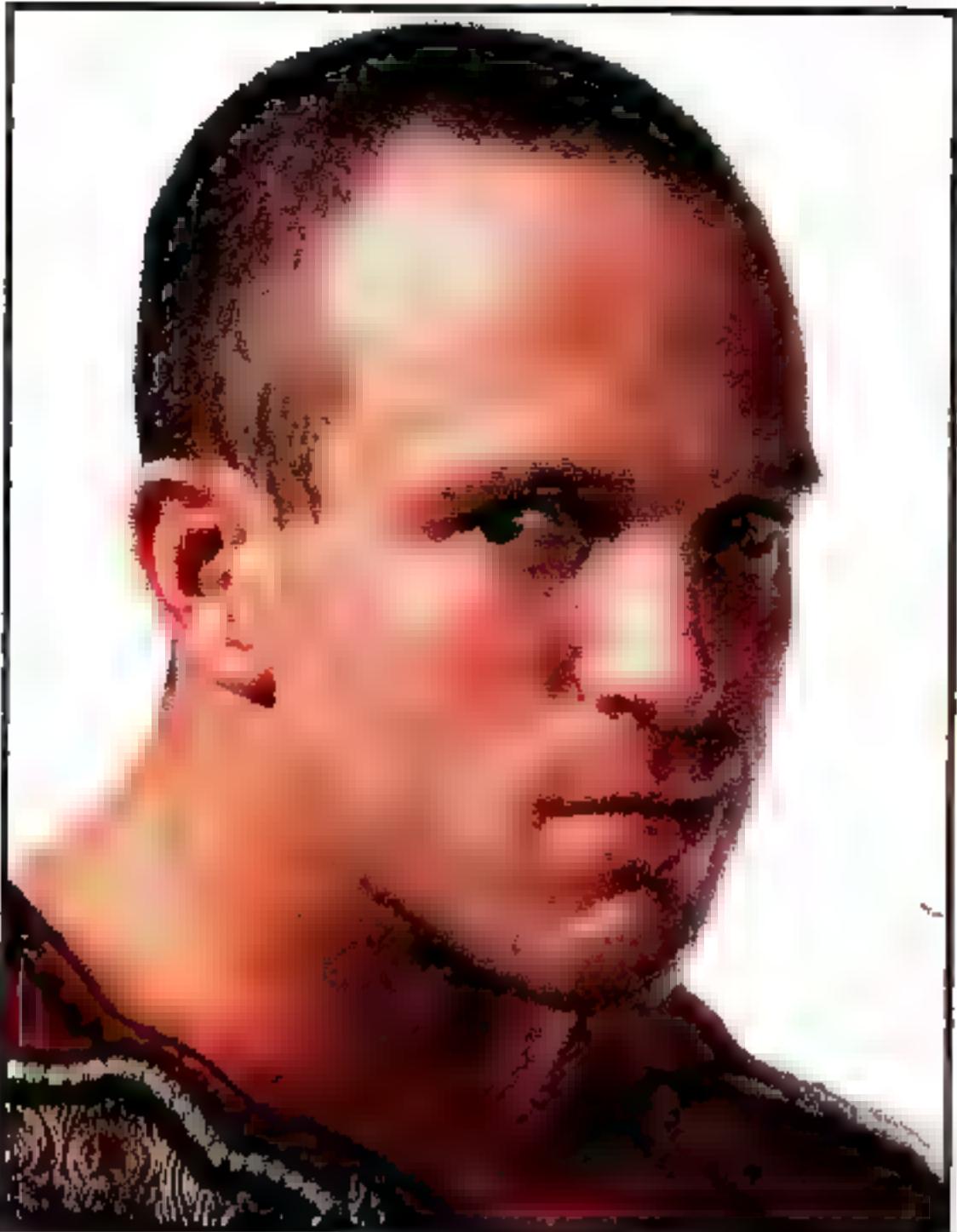
gotten the jump on The Band, but have also been jumped by them at times. Where do you see this feud heading?

A: I'll take it as far as I need to. Honestly, I think the time has come where the fans of TNA shouldn't have to deal with Kevin Nash and his old buddies walking around and acting like it's still 1996. They come out on *Impact* and act very disrespectful of the guys who've earned their keep in this federation. I agree with Hulk Hogan when he told them on camera that times are different now.

Q: Is that why you turned down membership in The Band when Nash offered it to you? After all, you've been part of heel alliances before, between Team Canada and your own role in forming the World Elite. So the problem can't be that you object in principle to being part of a group.

A: You're right. I don't object to group alliances in wrestling, but it all depends on what the group stands for and what the benefits of joining it are. I'll tell you the truth. If I were in the position to join the New World Order in the late-'90s, I probably would have jumped at the chance. But I didn't see any benefit to me in joining up with them now.





"I don't really see a future with The Band. They're part of the past."

Q: Why not?

A: Three reasons. First of all, I no longer want to be a follower, like I was with Scott D'Amore in Team Canada. I've grown up and matured to the point where, if I'm going to be in an alliance, I want to be in a position of authority. If I were a member of The Band, I'd be doing their bidding. Second, why the hell would I trust Kevin Nash? I stood up for the guy when Hall and Waltman attacked him, and he repays me by turning on me. Nash tells me it's nothing personal that he attacked me. Well, to me, if he did it once, he'd do it



As part of the World Elite faction, Young showed a more serious side of his personality. The more united the faction became, the more intense Young's performances became.

again. No thanks. And third, like I already said, I don't really see a future with The Band. They're part of the past.

Q: I never thought I'd hear Eric Young talking about being a leader. It flies in the face of the happy-go-lucky goofball image you established after splitting with Team Canada years ago.

A: I've always been serious about this business. Even when I was trying to make fans laugh with the comedy and Super Eric stuff, there was a lot of preparation that went into it every week. It's all a matter of knowing your role in the ring, and I've always tried to live up to that. My ultimate goal has always been to

get to where I'm at right now, and hopefully beyond that in the future.

Q: Was the comedic image a means to an end for you?

A: I'd say so. First of all, it gave me a way to show my versatility while I was still getting established as a solo wrestler in TNA. I could do the "paranoia" promos or come out and wrestle in a Sponge Bob bathing suit or whatever and, hopefully, give the fans a change of pace from the intensity they saw with Kurt Angle, Samoa Joe, and some of those other guys. Then later on I could switch gears, show off my athleticism and be a little more serious. Hopefully, it's worked because all I've tried to do from Day One is show off different sides of my personality.

Q: Has the image change played out with your more aggressive repertoire in the ring?

A: Without question. As Super Eric, it wouldn't have made much sense to go right at my opponents or to focus on the athleticism. I was able to bring that out when I was with the



Whether he was dressed as a turkey (above) or Super Eric (right), Eric Young used comedy to set himself apart from other TNA stars. These days he's been using his natural athletic talent.



World Elite, and it's worked for me in the ring, so I'm going to stick with it.

Q: Does that mean we can look forward to more aerial moves like that elbowdrop from the top of the cage?

A: Yes, but I'm not trying to become a high-flier like an A.J. Styles. I've got some of those moves in my repertoire and I'll use them when I need to. That cage match on *Impact* wasn't the first time, but it was the most widely seen so far. My goal is to be recognized as a complete wrestler. I'm not the biggest or smallest guy around, so I need to be able to incorporate elements of many different styles so I can work effectively against any opponent.

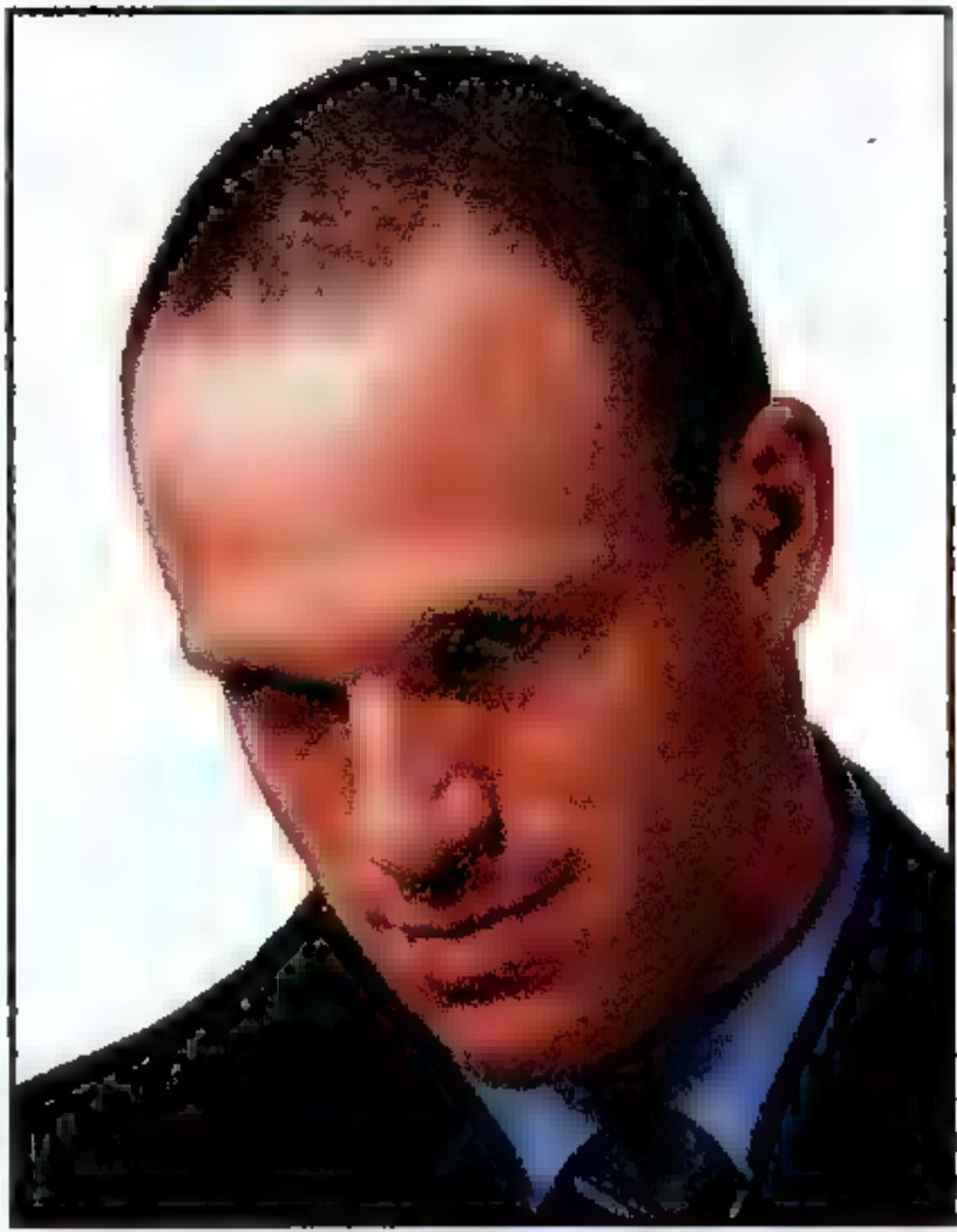
Q: You were a big Shawn Michaels fan before you broke into the business, correct? Your philosophy seems to be based on his.

A: Who isn't a fan of Shawn Michaels in the ring, [laughs]? Actually, even Bret has finally seemed to have made his peace with Shawn Michaels. Anyhow, yes, Michaels is my

all-time favorite, but I was also a huge fan of Bret and Owen Hart, Terry Funk, Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat, Arn Anderson, Bobby Eaton, and many, many others. What all those guys had in common was their versatility in the ring and their ability to have a great match with just about anyone. I was trained originally by Waldo Von Erich, who was a real smart guy and made a long career for himself in the business. At any rate, I've been in this business 12 years now and every day I learn something new. I still aspire to be like the people who inspired me to pursue a career in wrestling in the first place, from Shawn Michaels right on down the line.

Q: Is it true you were valedictorian of your graduating class in high school?

A: [Laughs] Oh, that story again? Yes, I was valedictorian, but it really wasn't as big a deal as it gets made out to be in some of the Internet stuff about me. I was a pretty good student, but I wasn't the smartest kid in the school or anything like



"I've been in this business 12 years now and every day I learn something new."

that. I was also a jock and a bit of a class clown. I did some stage and drama in school, too. In my school, students voted on the valedictorian, so it was kind of a popularity thing. Don't get me wrong—it was a nice honor. I just don't want people to think the former Super Eric is some sort of wrestling Einstein [laughs].

Q: Has a wrestling career always been your main goal?

A: Definitely. I played hockey, soccer, and rugby in school but I always loved pro wrestling and wanted to pursue a career in it from the time I was about six years old. I started training for wrestling literally right out of high school—within a couple weeks. I like to think of myself as a pretty eclectic person, in and out of the ring. But I'm doing what I love to do, and I hope my body stays healthy enough to put in another 12 years or more. I don't think I've hit my peak yet. □



Though he's quite comfortable working within a group, Young says he has no interest in joining Scott Hall, Sean Waltman, and Kevin Nash in The Band.

Is Tyler Black The Right Person For ROH To Build Around?



Photo by Scott Finkelstein

It was with moves like this hurricanrana, against Rhett Titus, that made the ROH fan base first take notice of Tyler Black. As champion, he's going to need to continue his dominance if he wants to become one of ROH's greatest champions.

C.M. PUNK. SAMOA JOE. Jamie Noble. Daniel Bryan. Homicide. Desmond Wolfe.

In addition to having all found success in either WWE or TNA, all have another thing in common. They all have worn the Ring of Honor heavyweight championship belt.

The latest man to join that prestigious club is a 24-year-old Iowa native with five years experience in the sport. Tyler Black arrived in ROH in 2007 as a member of the macabre faction The Age of the Fall, and within months was one-half of the ROH tag team champions with Jimmy Jacobs.

Black's star quickly rose as fans, and ROH matchmakers, saw the lanky wrestler's potential as a singles competitor. He became one of the top contenders to the ROH championship, and after coming up short several times, finally took the belt from Austin Aries at ROH's Eighth Anniversary Show in New York City in February.

But not everyone has been so quick to get on board the Tyler Black bandwagon. Some fans have outright rejected Black, even bombarding him with catcalls and chants of "Over-rated!" during his matches. The backlash from some fans raises the question: Is Tyler Black the right wrestler for ROH to build around? Or will Black fail to live up to the standards of some of the great ROH champions that preceded him?

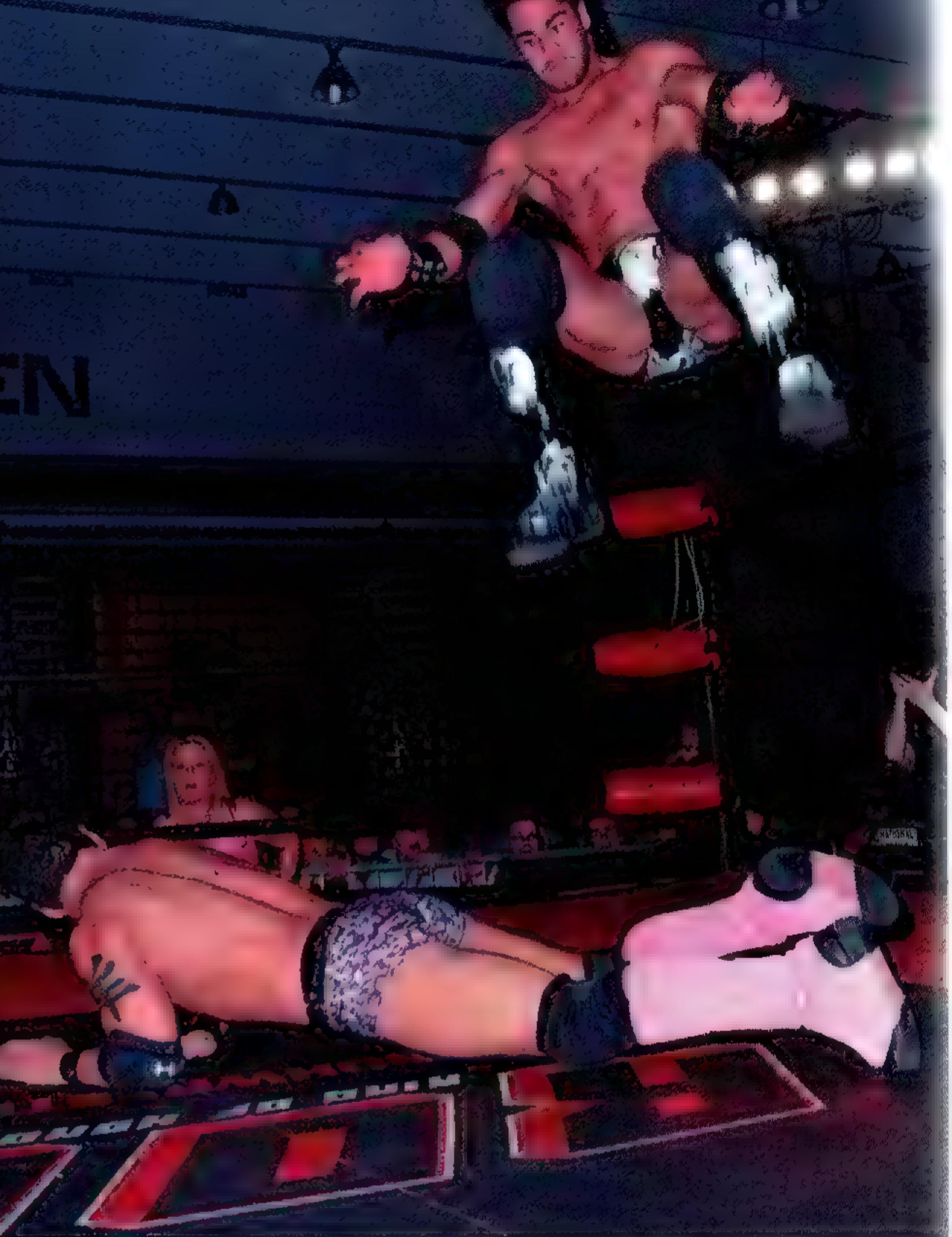
It's a question that Publisher Stu Saks, Editor-in-Chief Frank Krewda, Senior Writer Al Castle, and Contributing Writer Al Alven kicked around during a recent teleconference.

STU SAKS: Let's get to it. Tyler Black has held the Ring of Honor heavyweight championship for several months now. Does any one here have their doubts in his ability to be the company's flag-bearer?

AL ALVEN: Well, some fans certainly seem to have their doubts, and I can't say I blame them. Black's an exciting guy, but I don't think we've seen enough out of him to warrant this position in the company. Yes, he's got a good look and can do some pretty innovative stuff in the ring, but he's clearly still learning the ropes. I mean, I can't think of a single good promo he's delivered in his three years in the company—even right after winning the title.

FRANK KREWDA: Part of the problem is that the ROH roster doesn't have the depth that it did just a year ago. Some fans might have a problem with him being the top singles star in the promotion, but really, who else is there? Austin Aries is a strong main event foil for Black, but it's a pretty big drop off after him. Long gone are the days of having Samoa Joe, Homicide, Nigel McGuinness, and Bryan Danielson all at your disposal. And so Black might be the right choice just because there isn't another choice.

AL CASTLE: I don't think you guys are giving Tyler a fair shake. The fact is that he earned his way



Expert observers believe that Black will eventually fill out his 6'1" frame, but for now his game is more finesse and speed than it is power.

into ROH's top tier even when Danielson and McGuinness were still in the company. And there's a reason for that. Tyler's got the tools. I realized that the night he took McGuinness to the limit in his first title shot back in 2008. He's an incredibly talented kid—and I do mean kid. He's just 24 years old, which makes what he's accomplished so far all the more impressive.

SAKS: I'm with Al—Castle, that is. I'd like to think Tyler Black

"Yes, he's got a good look and can do some pretty innovative stuff in the ring, but he's clearly still learning the ropes."

—Al Alven

would be in this position regardless of whether ROH lost McGuinness and Danielson last year. We had Tyler at number 17

of our last "PWI 500"—ahead of guys like Jack Swagger, A.J. Styles, and Rey Mysterio Jr. So let's not act like he came out of nowhere to capture the title. He had been working toward that goal since he was 16.

ALVEN: I'm just not convinced there aren't better candidates for that spot than Tyler. Roderick Strong has been with ROH for seven years now. How about giving him an opportunity? If it's size you're looking for, then how about

Claudio Castagnoli? Or Davey Richards, he'd be a good choice to be the face of Ring of Honor.

KREWDA: Those are some pretty solid names you threw out there, Al. I guess there's nothing stopping those guys from getting their opportunity, as well. But right now, it's Tyler Black's time—and it's a pretty important time. With TNA and WWE going head to head on Monday nights, ROH is sure to benefit from the trickle down effect, and maybe get some

new viewers for its Monday night show on HDNet.

CASTLE: You're right, Frank. ROH is at a critical point right now. More people are being exposed to ROH than ever before, and the guy at the top of promotion is going to have a lot of weight on his shoulders. But Tyler's shown so far that he could be a good representative for the company. It's important for ROH to put forth a major-league presentation, and I think Black helps them do that.



Photo by George Napolitan

Perhaps expecting too much from Black at such a young age, the ROH fans have been particularly rough on the champion. If he can handle the cynics, he should be able to win most of them back over time.

SAKS: Speaking of major leagues, let me throw in this monkey wrench. What if WWE or TNA were to swoop in and try to sign Tyler Black away from Ring of Honor? He certainly has the size and look that they would be interested in. Is that something that ROH officials should think about when deciding to invest so much in him?

"Tyler's shown so far that he could be a good representative for the company. It's important for ROH to put forth a major-league presentation, and I think Black helps them do that."

—Al Casta

KREWDA: Ring of Honor can't worry too much about that sort of thing, or else they'd never push anybody. The reality is that whenever one of the Big Two comes calling with a big money offer, ROH is going to have a hard time competing with them. They just need to have a lot of talented guys in the pipeline that could step in to fill that void whenever a top star leaves. That's what Tyler did.

ALVEN: And that's another reason Tyler needs to work harder to improve himself. If he learned anything from Joe, Punk, Nigel, and Bryan, it should have been that your Ring of Honor career could be an audition for a higher paying job. And so he has to concentrate on improving on some of the little things—showing more emotion in his interviews, putting substance over flash in his wrestling matches, that sort of thing.

CASTLE: I'll agree that there's room for improvement, but that doesn't take away from the fact that Tyler's worked hard to get where he is.

SAKS: I think we could all agree with that. □



Reaching the top of Ring of Honor puts Black in a position where he may receive a phone call from WWE or TNA in the near future. That alone should inspire him to keep improving.

wrestling timeline

OCTOBER 26, 1978:
Born in Chicago, Illinois

Photo by Joe Zanolle

MARCH 2, 2002:
Scores early career-defining win over Eddie Guerrero to become a two-time IWA: MS heavyweight champion

FEBRUARY 7, 2003:
Loses IWA: MS heavyweight title to Chris Hero in a two-out-of-three-falls match that goes a combined 92:15

MAY 12, 2003:
Defeats Khalsha Singh in a dark match before *Monday Night Raw*

DECEMBER 5, 2001:
Defeats the Suicide Kid for the IWA: Mid-South heavyweight title



Photo by Joe Zanolle

NOVEMBER 9, 2002:
Opens the eyes of Ring of Honor followers with a win over Michael Shane



Photo by Joe Zanolle

C.M. Punk

INSIDE WRESTLING journeys back in time to examine the career of a superstar who has left a major imprint on the sport

FEBRUARY 14, 2004:

Falls to A.J. Styles in tournament final to crown ROH's first Pure champion, after defeating John Walters and Doug Williams in earlier rounds



Photo by Joe Zanolle

APRIL 24, 2004:

Teams with best friend and Second City Saints stablemate Colt Cabana to defeat Mark and Jay Briscoe for the Ring of Honor tag team title

SEPTEMBER 25, 2004:

Loses to Homicide in tournament final to crown first Full Impact Pro champion

DECEMBER 17, 2003:

With Julio Dinero, turns on The Gathering stable leader, Raven, in TNA



Photo by Vern Verna

Earns the respect of Rick Steamboat, saving The Dragon from an attack by ROH's Generation Next



Photo by William McCarty

DECEMBER 20, 2003:

Teams with Ace Steel and Jimmy Jacobs as Team Steamboat in win over Generation Next members Alex Shelley, Austin Aries, and Jack Evans



Photo by Joe Zanolle

wrestling timeline

OCTOBER 23, 2004:

Beats A.J. Styles for his fifth and final reign as IWA: MS heavyweight champ

JANUARY 29, 2005:

Teams with Kevin Sullivan and Abdullah the Butcher against Dusty Rhodes, Dustin Rhodes, and Mike Graham at WrestleReunion.

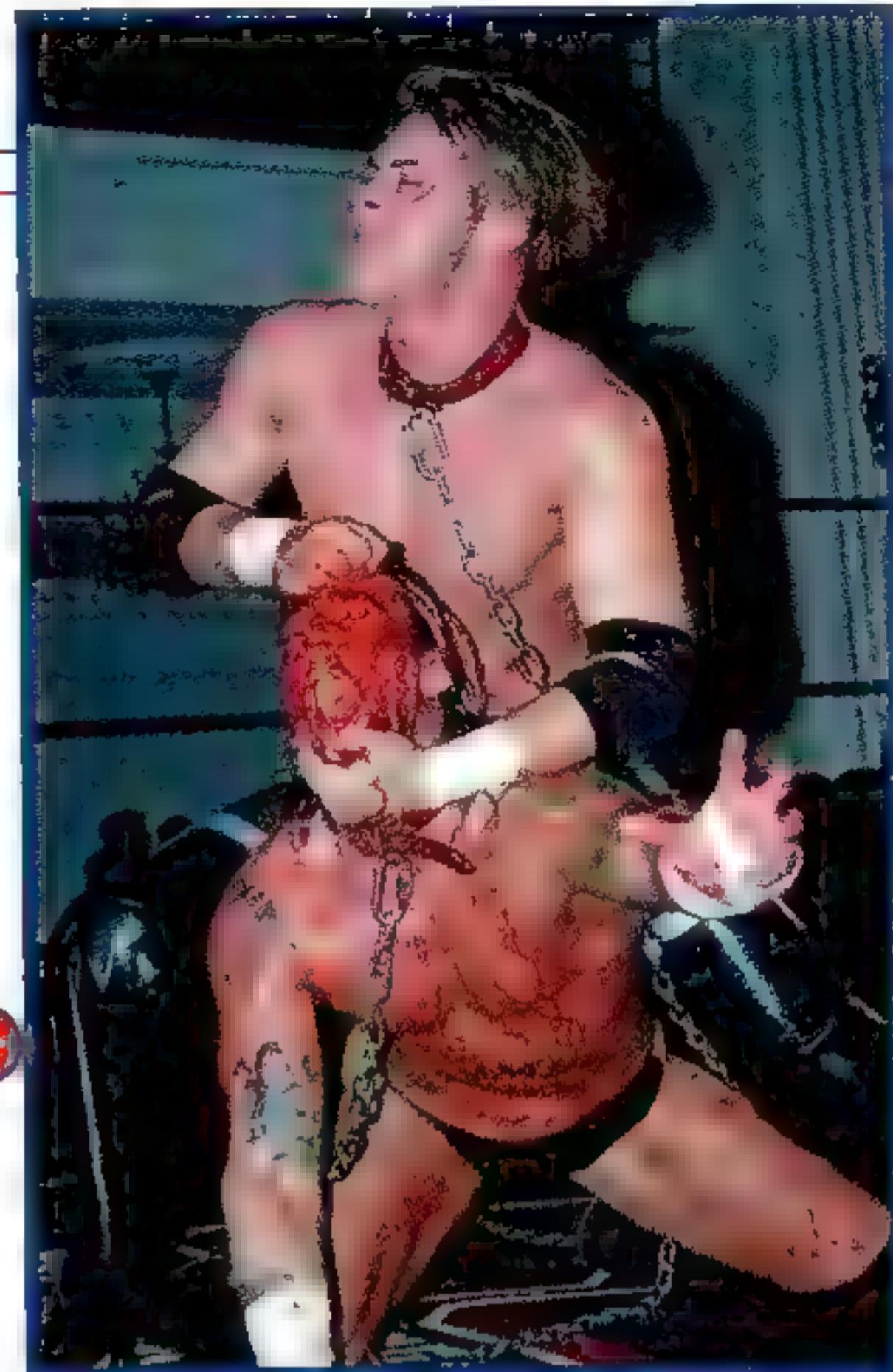


Photo by George Napolitano

MAY 07, 2005:

Lost to Jimmy Rave in an extremely bloody dog-dollar match

Loses to Samoa Joe in finale of an epic three-match series for the ROH championship; the previous two matches resulted in 60-minute draws

APRIL 16, 2005:

Under the managerial guidance of Bobby "The Brain" Heenan, defeats Mike Krueger

MAY 13, 2005:

Ends feud with Rave after beating him in a steel cage match by delivering a suplex from the top of the cage



Photo by Joe Zarnolle



Photo by Wayne McCary



Photo by Michael W. Heayn

JUNE 18, 2005:

Shortly after signing a WWE contract, shocks the fans by beating Austin Aries for the Ring of Honor championship

AUGUST 12, 2005:

Drops ROH title to James Gibson in a match that also features Samoa Joe and Christopher Daniels

MAY 3, 2006:

Defeats Brent Albright in a strap match to win the OVW heavyweight title

JULY 2, 2005:

Wrestles a 60-minute draw against Delirious in final appearance for IWA: Mid-South

SEPTEMBER 21, 2005:

Makes debut in WWE developmental territory Ohio Valley Wrestling, suffering a ruptured eardrum and broken nose in win over Danny Inferno

APRIL 2, 2006:

Makes on-screen WWE debut in minor role as a gangster in John Cena's 1930s-era Chicago-inspired entrance at WrestleMania 22



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Photo by George Napolitano

APRIL 10, 2007:

Briefly joins The New Breed faction in its war against the ECW Originals

OCTOBER 28, 2007:

Successfully defends ECW title against The Miz at Cyber Sunday

MARCH 30, 2008:

Wins the fourth annual Money in the Bank match at WrestleMania 24, defeating Ken Kennedy, MVP, Shelton Benjamin, John Morrison, Chris Jericho, and Carlito

JUNE 23, 2008:

Drafted to the Raw brand, ending two-year ECW stint

JUNE 24, 2007:
Loses to John Morrison in finals of a tournament to crown a new ECW champion at Vengeance

SEPTEMBER 1, 2007:
Beats John Morrison in a Last Chance match to win the ECW championship

MAY 6, 2008:
Teams with ECW champion Kane to defeat Chavo Guerrero Jr. and Bam Neely on 100th episode of ECW On Syfy



Photo by George Napolitano



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wrestling timeline



Photo by George Napolitano

JUNE 30, 2008:

Cashes in Money in the Bank briefcase and defeats Edge for WWE World title, after Edge had been brutally attacked by Batista

SEPTEMBER 7, 2008:

Is unable to defend World title in Championship Scramble match after being assaulted by Legacy and Manu; the subbing Chris Jericho becomes new champion



Photo by Duane Long

JANUARY 19, 2009:

Pins William Regal in a no-DQ match for the Intercontinental title; becomes 19th WWF/E Triple Crown winner in the process

APRIL 13, 2009:

Drafted to Smackdown

AUGUST 17, 2008:

Defeats John Bradshaw Layfield in title defense at SummerSlam

OCTOBER 27, 2008:

Teams with Kofi Kingston to defeat Rhodes and DiBiase Jr. for the WWE World tag team title

APRIL 5, 2009:

At WrestleMania 25, becomes first man to win back-to-back Money in the Bank matches, defeating Kane, Kofi Kingston, MVP, Shelton Benjamin, Christian, Finlay, and Mark Henry



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Photo by George Napolitano



Photo by George Napolitano

AUGUST 23, 2009:

After turning his back on the fans, defeats Hardy in a wild TLC match at SummerSlam to become a three-time world champion

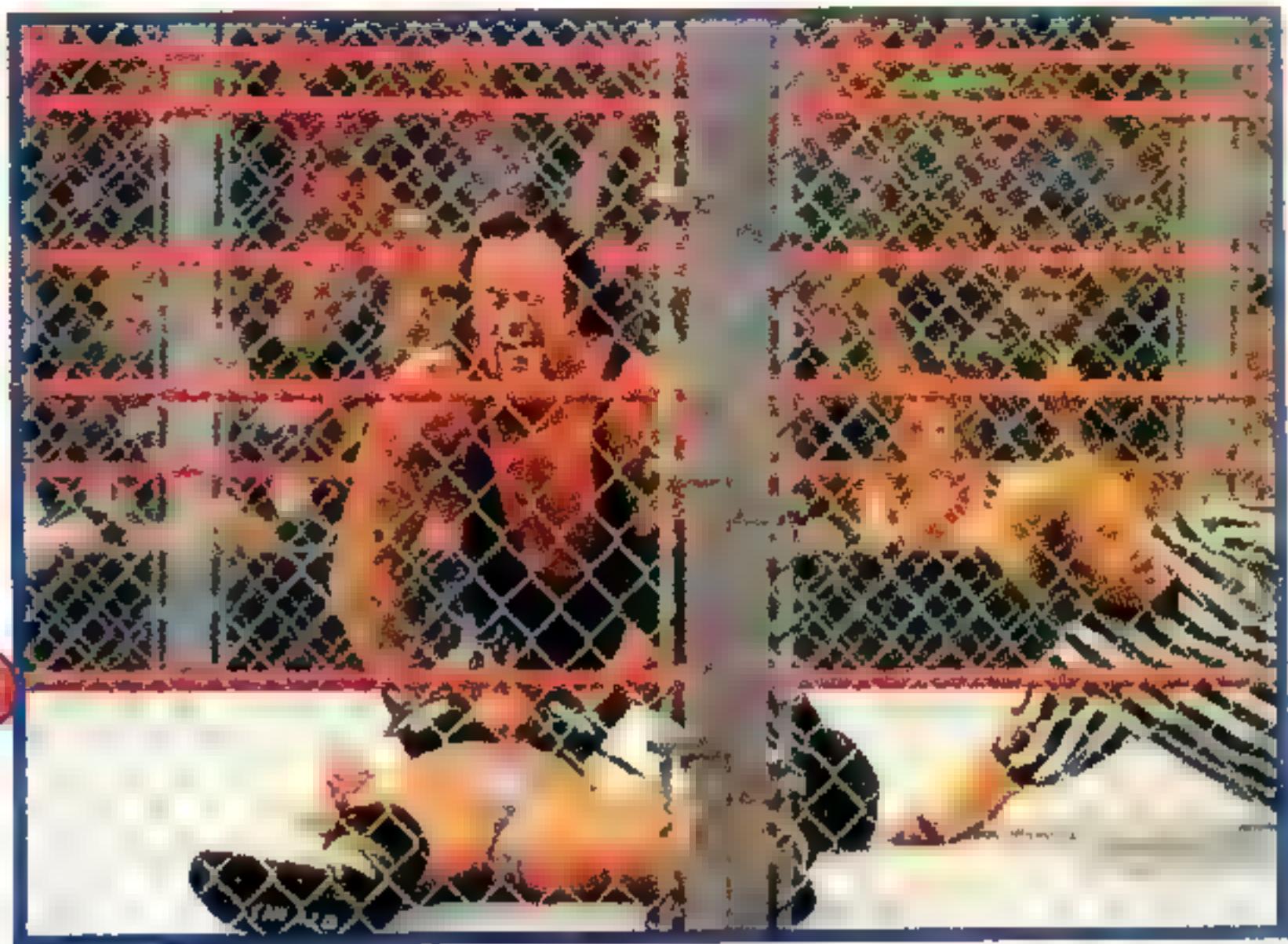


Photo by George Napolitano

MARCH 28, 2010:

Falls to Rey Mysterio Jr. at WrestleMania 26, failing to forcibly "convert" Mysterio to the SES

OCTOBER 4, 2009:

Loses World championship to 'Taker at Hell in a Cell

JUNE 7, 2009:

Uses MITB stipulation to defeat Jeff Hardy at Extreme Rules, after Hardy successfully defends the title against Edge

SEPTEMBER 13, 2009:

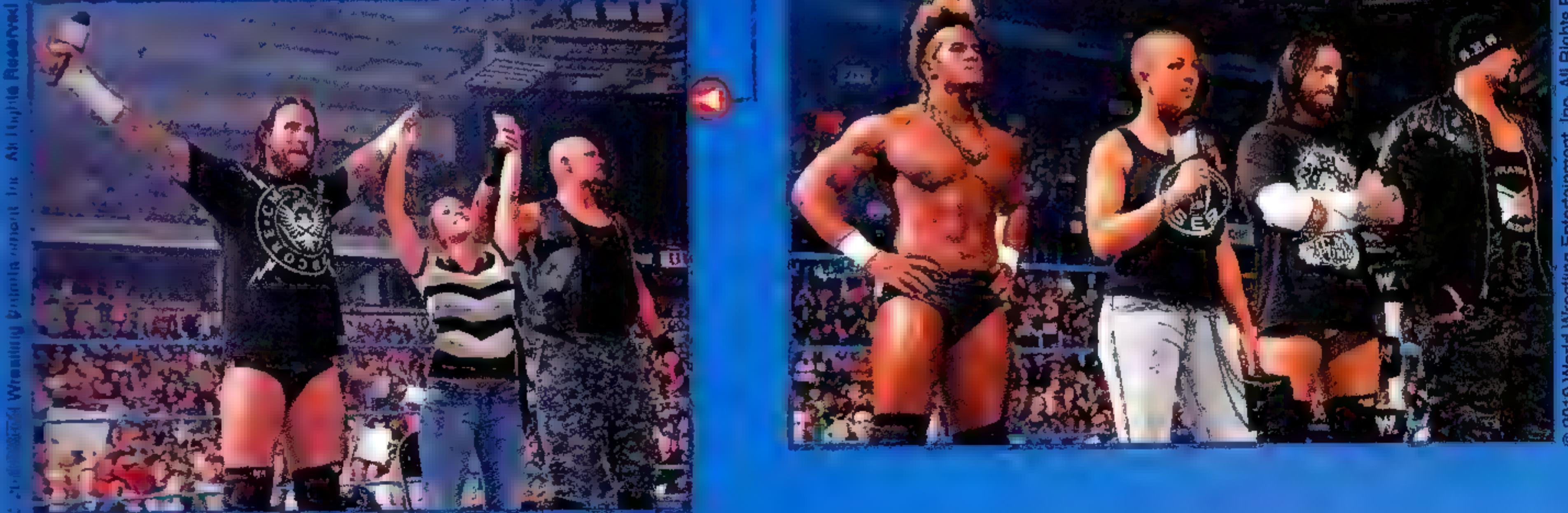
Technically becomes first man ever to make The Undertaker submit in title defense at Breaking Point with finish reminiscent of the Montreal Screwjob

DECEMBER 27, 2009:

Introduces Luke Gallows—the former Festus—as the first member of his Straight Edge Society, soon to be followed by Serena

FEBRUARY 7, 2010:

Announced as the mentor to NXT rookie Darren Young



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ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended April 28, 2010

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MASAKATSU FUNAKI & KEIJI MUTO
(January 3, 2010; from Taiyo Kea & Minoru Suzuki; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KAZ HAYASHI
(February 6, 2009; from Naomichi Marufuji; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: RYOTA HAMA
(March 21, 2010; from Satoshi Kojima; Tokyo, Japan)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BAZOOKA JOE
(September 12, 2009; from Chase Del Monte; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: ADEN CHAMBERS
(March 20, 2010; from Nick Logan; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RYAN RUSH & JULIAN STARR
(March 20, 2010; from Matt & Bryan Logan; Newark, DE)

FCW FLORIDA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: ALEX RILEY
(March 18, 2010; from Justin Gabriel; Tampa, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JIMMY & JULES USO
(March 13, 2010; from Joe Hennig & Brett DiBlase; Tampa, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JON MOXLEY
(April 17, 2010; beat Roderick Strong to claim the vacant title; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CHRIS GREY & TOMMY TAYLOR
(October 3, 2009; from Erick Stevens & Roderick Strong; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO FLORIDA HERITAGE CHAMPION: BRAD ALLEN
(October 3, 2009; from Rhett Titus; Crystal River, FL)

IWF HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEVIN KNIGHT
(February 20, 2010; from Chris Streeter; West Paterson, NJ)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(September 27, 2009; beat Togi Makabe to win the vacant title; Kobe, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TESTSUYA NAITO & YUJIRO TAKAHASHI
(January 4, 2010; from Brother Ray & Brother Devon and Karl Anderson & Giant Bernard; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: NAOMICHI MARU FUJI (January 4, 2010; from Tiger Mask IV; Tokyo, Japan)

NWA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: ADAM PEARCE
(March 14, 2010; from Blue Demon Jr.; Charlotte, NC)

NWA JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: MIKE QUACKENBUSH
(May 11, 2007; from Tiger Mask IV; Portage, IN)

NWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RASCHE BROWN & KEITH WALKER
(October 4, 2008; from Phoenix Star & Zokre; Robstown, TX)

NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: MSCHIF
(April 27, 2008; from Amazing Kong; Cape Girardeau, MO)

OWW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BEEF WELLINGTON
(February 27, 2010; won a battle royal for the vacant title; Louisville, KY)

OWW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TED McNALER & ADAM REVOLVER
(March 24, 2010; from Benjamin Bray & Andrew LaCroix; Louisville, KY)

OWW TV CHAMPION: KAMIKAZE KID
(November 25, 2009; defeated Shiloh in tournament final for vacant title; Louisville, KY)

OWW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: C.J. LANE
(March 24, 2010; from Josie; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: DAVEY RICHARDS
(February 27, 2010; from Kenny Omega; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT & NICK JACKSON
(August 31, 2008; from Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: TAKASHI SUGIURA
(December 6, 2009; from Go Shiozaki; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: YOSHINOBU KANEMARU
(October 31, 2009; from Jushin Liger; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TAKESHI RIKIO & MOHAMMED YONE
(December 6, 2009; from Kensuke Sasaki & Takeshi Morishima; Tokyo, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: TYLER BLACK
(February 13, 2010; from Austin Aries; New York, NY)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CHRIS HERO & CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI
(April 3, 2010; from Jay & Mark Briscoe; Charlotte, NC)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: MADISON EAGLES
(April 11, 2010; from MsChif; Berwyn, IL)

TNA GLOBAL CHAMPION: BIG ROB
(January 27, 2010; from Eric Young; Cardiff, Wales)

TNA KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION: MADISON RAYNE
(April 18, 2010; from Angelina Love; St. Louis, MO)

TNA KNOCKOUTS TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MADISON RAYNE, VELVET SKY, & LACEY VON ERICH
(March 8, 2010; defeated Angelina Love & Tara and Sarita & Taylor Wilde for the vacant title; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: ROB VAN DAM
(April 19, 2010; from A.J. Styles; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT MORGAN
(January 17, 2010; from The British Invasion; Orlando, FL)

TNA X DIVISION CHAMPION: KAZARIAN
(April 18, 2010; defeated Shannon Moore and Homicide for the belt after Doug Williams was stripped of the title; St. Louis, MO)

WRESTLING SUPERSTARS LIVE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEITH WALKER
(February 21, 2009; from Ricky Landell; Michigan City, IN)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: DREW McINTYRE
(December 13, 2009; from John Morrison; San Antonio, TX)

WWE WORLD CHAMPION: JACK SWAGGER
(March 30, 2010; from Chris Jericho; Las Vegas, NV)

WWE UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DAVID HART SMITH & TYSON KIDD
(April 26, 2010; from The Miz & The Big Show; Richmond, VA)

WWE CHAMPION: JOHN CENA
(March 28, 2010; from Batista; Glendale, AZ)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: THE MIZ
(October 5, 2009; from Kofi Kingston; Wilkes-Barre, PA)

WWE WOMEN'S CHAMPION: BETH PHOENIX
(April 25, 2010; from Michelle McCool; Baltimore, MD)

WWE DIVAS CHAMPION: EVE TORRES
(April 12, 2010; from Maryse; London, England)

INSIDE WRESTLING & THE WRESTLER

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WRESTLING

TRISH STRATUS

REVEALS ALL!

- Her Transformation From Sex Kitten To Superstar
- Her Unique Relationship With Vince McMahon
- The Possibility Of A Comeback
- 90 Minutes Of Hot Stuff From The Hottest Diva Ever!

TRIPLE-H
WITHOUT HBK
THE GAME'S
ABOUT TO CHANGE

CONTENTS

VOLUME 34, 2010

COVER PHOTOS:
TRISH STRATUS BY STEVEAPOSTLE.COM

COVER DESIGN:
MILOSZ WACHOWIAK

FEATURES

30 Q & A: TRISH STRATUS

Though she no longer competes in WWE, Trish remains as active, alluring, and visible as ever. Senior Writer Harry Burkett gets the now-brunette bombshell to dish candidly on a variety of topics in an exclusive 90-minute interview that is guaranteed to Stratus-fy!

48 COUNTDOWN TO A SUPERFEUD!

A HARDY-RVD SHOWDOWN IS INEVITABLE

Being kindred souls is cool, but not so cool that these TNA buds are willing to sacrifice the TNA World title for the sake of their friendship. A red-hot showdown between these two daredevils is bound to go down

52 TRIPLE-H WITHOUT SHAWN MICHAELS ...

THE GAME'S ABOUT TO CHANGE

Contrary to common opinion, D-X was about more than fun and games. Triple-H came to rely on HBK for his friendship, ability, and guidance over the years. But now Shawn is retired and Hunter is left on his own ... and there's no telling how he will react

58 HAS STRONG BEEN WRONG ALL ALONG?

IT'S TIME FOR HIM TO GO FOR IT ... ALONE!

Throughout his career, Rod Strong has been a reliable "team player," whether in a tag team or a faction. But that "virtue" hasn't necessarily served him well. With the ROH title within his reach, it's time for Strong to stand alone

DEPARTMENTS

4 YOUR LETTERS

6 WHAT'S HAPPENING BY JEFF RUOSS

10 ON ASSIGNMENT BY LIZ HUNTER

12 ON THE FARM WITH LOUIE DEE

16 THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN

18 POINT/COUNTERPOINT

20 INTRODUCING ... MAXWELL CHICAGO

22 WORKIN' STIFF BY AL CASTLE

24 SPOTLIGHT ON ... REY MYSTERIO JR.

66 THE WRESTLING ANALYST: JACK SWAGGER

72 OFFICIAL WRESTLING RATINGS

74 REMEMBER HIM?

30

48

58

WHAT'S HAPPENING

BY JEFF RUOSS

WE ISSUED A round of pink slips in late-April, which has become as much of a tradition as the annual talent draft. The company released seven employees, wiping the slate clean for the draft to follow as well as the crop of rookies that will be emerging from *NXT*.

The most controversial release was that of **Mickie James**. The five-time former WWE Women's champion and one-time Divas champion is respected throughout the industry and was arguably the most popular woman in the company. In 2009, James was voted the *PWI* Woman of the Year and was ranked number one in *PWI*'s "Female 50."

So what prompted her release? It seemed obvious that James' release was a possibility for the past several months, considering her supposed weight problem. She was the butt of a humiliating and unfunny *Smackdown* storyline. She also released a country music album outside the auspices of WWE and was preparing for a life outside of wrestling. Yet the most recent scuttlebutt is James was partying too hard during WWE's recent European tour and delayed the bus scheduled to take the wrestlers to their next stop.

The remaining cuts weren't much of a surprise. **Shelton Benjamin**, labeled an underachiever since shortly after his 2002 arrival in WWE, might be the biggest disappointment. He was a wrestling teammate of **Brock Lesnar** at the University of Minnesota and held the Southern tag team title with Lesnar in Ohio Valley. Despite several attempts, including his tag team partnership with **Charlie Haas**, his reigns as Intercontinental and U.S. champion, and his most recent heel and babyface runs as the "Gold Standard," Benjamin was in no better position within WWE than he was eight years ago.



Photo by George Napolitano

While some members of the WWE roster were understandably perturbed at being stuck in Europe after a recent tour, WWE heavyweight champ John Cena decided to take an optimistic view of being grounded in Belfast, Ireland.

stars ever. He had hung tough in WWE since 1998 and became such a mainstay that he purchased a permanent home in Texas.

Earlier that week, the entire Raw roster was out of action, thanks to the volcano eruption in Iceland that grounded thousands of travelers in Europe. The WWE wrestlers were on the final leg of a grinding tour that included events in Austria, England, Scotland, France, and Ireland. They were stuck in Belfast for days and a few became homesick.

"I want to be home right now with my wife and my dog," tweeted **Ted DiBiase Jr.** "It's a lot different being gone for work as opposed to being held against your will."

The always up-tempo **John Cena** approached the situation with gusto. "We're in a fantastic city, Belfast has been

Mike Knox, who gained attention in Ultimate Pro Wrestling as the partner of wrestling brother **Marshall Knox** during his formative years, never found a niche in WWE. He was paired with **Kelly Kelly** when WWE launched its ECW brand in 2006, but hadn't made much of an impact since. It looks as if the **Snitsky** spot is again open in WWE.

Paul Burchill will have to survive without his faux sister, **Katie Lea**, who spent years in OVW before getting the call-up, was also sent packing.

Terry Gordy Jr., otherwise known as **Slam Master J**, should have known his time was limited when he was given such a ridiculous rapper gimmick. Likewise, **Jimmy Wang Yang** will be two-stepping out of WWE. Both of these performers were relatively popular at live events, but their gimmicks failed to translate to episodic television.

Sho Funaki, who had been appearing as Kung Funaki during the past 18 months, was—inexplicably at times—one of the most enduring WWE super-

WWE's annual talent purge touched down on Mickie James this year. Despite her incredible popularity and accomplishments, management had soured on her for a variety of reasons.

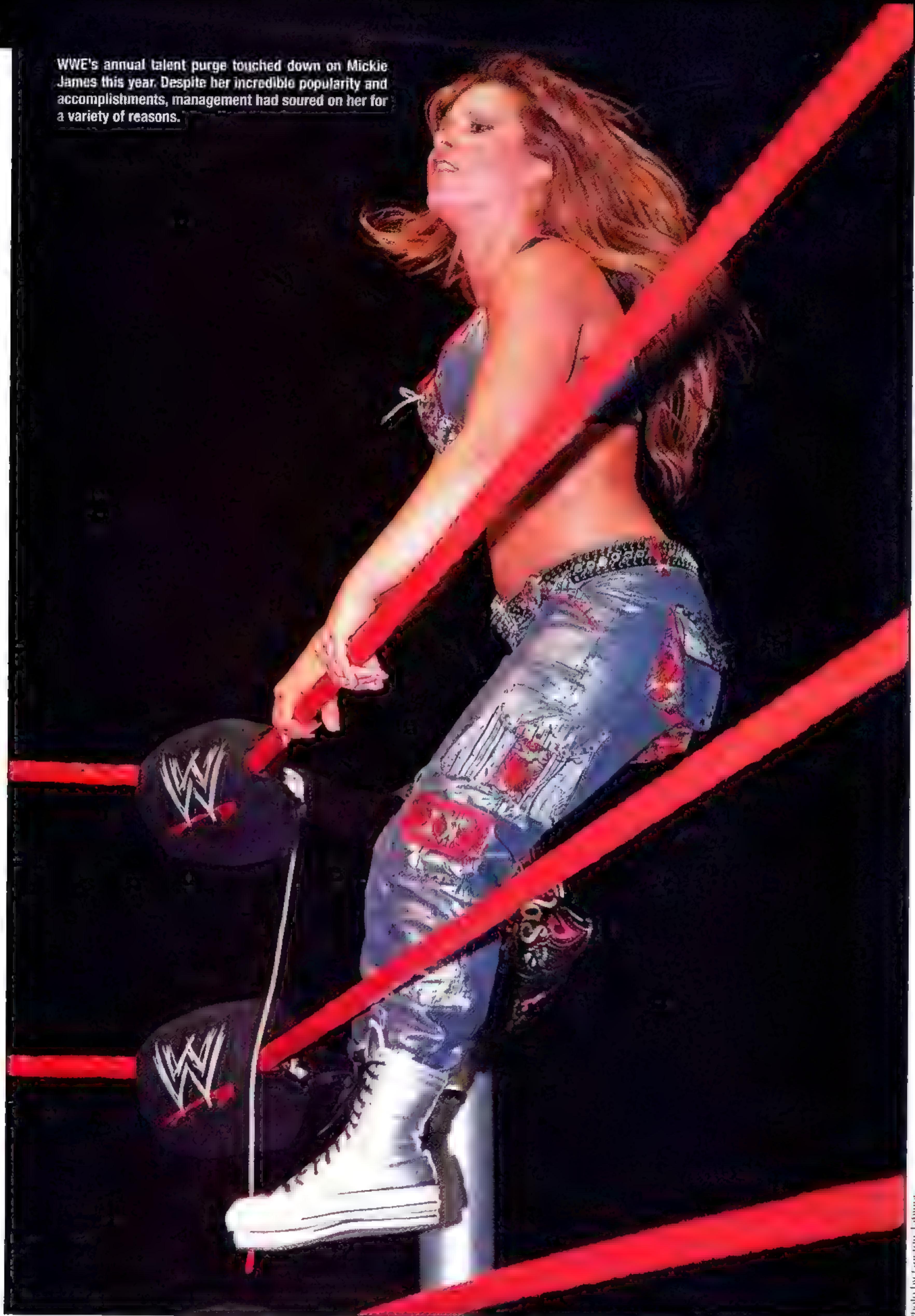


Photo by Tony T. Ladine



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Things got scary for TNA's Daffney, who sustained a stinger, concussion, and bruised sternum while wrestling Miss Betsy. Daffney appears to be okay; let's just hope this incident doesn't affect her psyche.

just overly gracious as a host to us, and we're making do," Cena told Britain's *Sky Sports News*. "We certainly could have it a lot worse ... We actually made a decision about halfway through our tour to finish the tour. We had a couple of days that actually involved 40 hours of straight travel, just to make sure that we got to certain towns in the U.K. and in Europe. Belfast was our last stop, and we said we're gonna make it no matter what."

On April 21, two days after the volcanic ash caused them to miss a live edition of *Raw* in the U.S., the stranded wrestlers embarked on a three-hour ferry ride from Ireland to Scotland, where they traveled another four hours to an airport in Edinburgh. They then took the long transatlantic flight back to America, arriving at Bradley International Airport in Connecticut later that night.

Daffney was involved in a scary accident at Universal Studios in Orlando, where she suffered a spinal injury during a match against **Miss Betsy**, a trainee of the Team 3-D Wrestling Academy. Daffney stayed in the ring for 20 minutes, unable to move for several minutes, while the ropes were removed and paramedics prepared to transport her to a local hospital. She was diagnosed with a stinger, a bruised sternum, and a concussion.

The scream queen gave more details via her MySpace

page: "I sunset-flipped my opponent, but she stayed standing, then she sat down, which caused my bruised sternum. Honestly, after that, I went into auto-pilot mode. I do not remember the rest of the match—even the finishing move (a sit-down spinebuster) and the 1-2-3."

Unfortunately, the Knockouts division took another hit when **Angelina Love** caught her arm in **Tara's** knee brace during a tag team match on *Impact*. She suffered a biceps tear and ligament damage. Tara had just turned on her partner the previous night and the two were set for a singles grudge feud. Angelina will no doubt have revenge in mind when she returns.

Chris Hero has renewed his contract with Ring of Honor. Hero, who made his ROH debut in January 2006, is best known for his matches against **Bryan Danielson**, **Eddie Kingston**, and **Tyler Black**. He also held the ROH tag team title with **Claudio Castagnoli** as The Kings of Wrestling for several months in '06. He teamed with Castagnoli to regain the tag team belts from **The Briscoe Brothers** shortly after his contract renewal.

I was recently invited to join TNA in St. Louis, Missouri, for the Lockdown pay-per-view and Fanfest activities. It was my pleasure to present awards to **Dory Funk Jr.**, **Baron Von Raschke**, **Jimmy Hart**, and **Bobby Heenan** honoring their storied careers and contributions to the business. The fans couldn't have been more gracious in letting these true wrestling legends know just how much their work has meant. It was especially nice to see Bobby Heenan out signing autographs and shaking hands with the fans after all he has been through with his health issues.

In other award news, the Cauliflower Alley Club held its annual bash in Las Vegas in mid-April to honor the veterans of the wrestling fraternity. Former NWA champion **Dan Severn** received the Lou Thesz Award, and **Jim Ross** was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Other male honorees were **Roger Kirby**, **Dean Ho**, and **Rip Hawk**. The ladies wrestling honoree was **Joyce Grable**. **George Gadaski** and **Lee Fields** were honored posthumously. **Magic Schwarz**, a movie tough guy who has starred in films ranging from *Over The Top* to *Lionheart*, was the REEL honoree. **Vance Nevada**, a wrestler and trainer best known for his work in NWA Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling, was recognized for his contributions to the preservation of wrestling history.

The top prize of the convention went to **Ted DiBiase Sr.**, recipient of the CAC's Iron Mike Award, named after organization founder **Mike Mazurki**, who spanned the worlds of wrestling and entertainment from the 1940s through the '80s. "This is one of those times when I wish my dad were here to see this," DiBiase said in an interview with **Jeff Sharkey** of the Cauliflower Alley Club. "This award is voted on not only by my peers, but my father's peers as well. It's the highest award that can be given to a pro wrestler."

CAC members also paid tribute to the several wrestlers who have passed away recently. While the list reads like a



Photo by Mike Lano



Photos by George Tahinos/TNA Wrestling

With legends Dick "The Destroyer" Beyer, Terry Funk, and Nick Bockwinkel looking on, Ted DiBiase Sr. receives the Iron Mike Award from the Cauliflower Alley Club at its 2010 convention (left) in Las Vegas. In St. Louis, Jeff Ruoss presents plaques to Baron Von Raschke, Bobby Heenan, Dory Funk Jr., and Jimmy Hart during the fanfest activities the Saturday before TNA's Lockdown event (above).

who's who of the golden age in some respects, the wrestling world was particularly shocked by the premature death of **Chris Kanyon** on April 2 at age 40. Kanyon suffered from bipolar disorder and had threatened suicide in the weeks leading up to his death. He died of an overdose of medication. Kanyon was a journeyman wrestler for many years, part of the Men at Work tag team with **Mark Starr** in WCW and then as the masked Mortis in Raven's Nest. He enjoyed his greatest success with close friend **"Diamond" Dallas Page**, and the two won both the WCW and WWF World tag team titles. Kanyon disclosed his homosexuality, but despite his attempts to use that to make an impact in the wrestling business, he quietly retired the following year.

Gene Kiniski, the only man to hold both the AWA and NWA World titles, died of cancer in Blaine, Washington. He was 81. The Alberta native played football for the University of Arizona and the Canadian Football League's Edmonton Eskimos before becoming a pro wrestler in 1952. He wrestled NWA World champions Lou Thesz, **Dick Hutton**, **Pat O'Connor**, and **Buddy Rogers** before beating **Verne Gagne** for the AWA crown on July 11, 1961. He lost the title back to Gagne about a month later, but went on to headline Madison Square Garden against WWWF World champion **Bruno Sammartino**. "Big Thunder" defeated Thesz for the NWA World title on January 7, 1966, and finally lost the strap to Dory Funk Jr. on February 11, 1969.

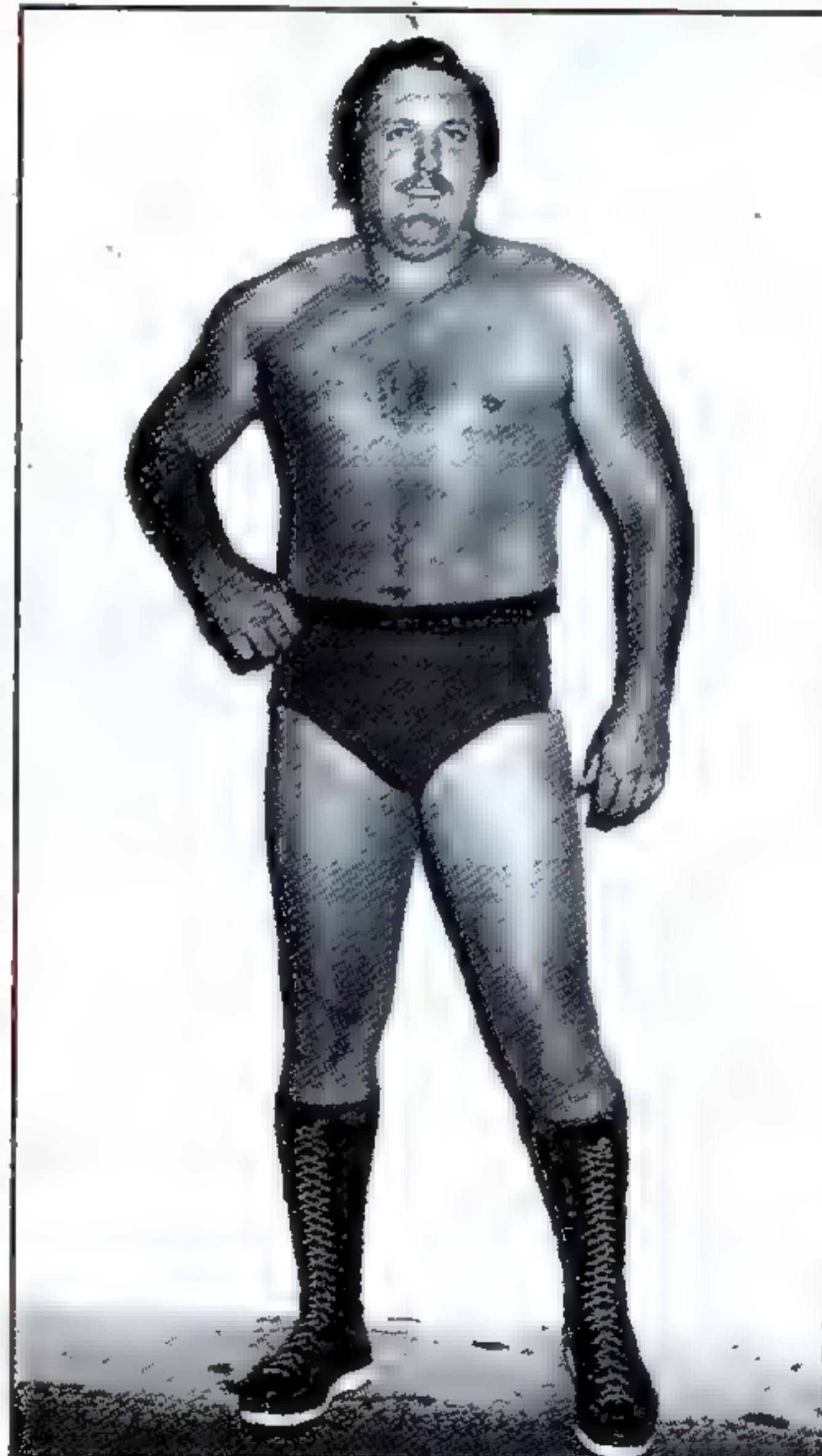
His sons, **Nick** and **Kelly Kiniski**, followed him into the business. The

man who claimed to be "Canada's Greatest Athlete" wrestled his final match on February 25, 1992, four decades after making his debut, teaming with **Chris Jericho** and **Lance Storm** against **Bob Brown**, **Don Callis**, and **Gerry Morrow**. Modern fans may remember him as the tough-as-nails referee in **Ric Flair's** NWA World title victory over **Harley Race** at Starrcade '83.

John Hill, better known as **Guy "The Stomper" Mitchell** and **"Gentleman" Jerry Valiant**, passed away at age 68 after a long battle with cancer. Hill was best remembered as the third Valiant brother, taking Jimmy Valiant's place after he took ill in the mid-1970s. He and Johnny Valiant won the WWF tag team championship in 1979.

Earlier in his career, Hill wrestled throughout the United States and Canada and held such titles as the NWA Southern heavyweight championship, Australia's IWA heavyweight championship, and several regional NWA tag team titles.

Finally, we bid a fond farewell to **Sandy Scott**, who died of pancreatic cancer at age 75 on March 11. He and older brother **George Scott** formed **The Flying Scotts** and enjoyed success in Western Canada, the Mid-Atlantic, the Pacific Northwest, and the Upper Midwest. Later in his career, Scott served as an official for Jim Crockett Promotions, World Championship Wrestling, and Smoky Mountain Wrestling.



John Hill, a.k.a. Guy "The Stomper" Mitchell and "Gentleman" Jerry Valiant, recently passed away after a long bout with cancer. He was 68.

ON ASSIGNMENT

FOR MY MONEY, Jim Cornette is one of the 'top promo men' wrestling has ever seen, but the promos he's cutting online these days are in a category of their own.

For those of you who haven't been visiting Jim Cornette's website or checking in with Eric Bischoff's Facebook page, here's what you've been missing.

On March 19, Cornette sent a 1,000-word e-mail to TNA talent coordinator Terry Taylor. Cornette and Taylor go back at least 30 years and worked together in TNA from 2006 until his release last September. Cornette considered Taylor to be a friend and felt compelled to get a few things off his chest. But according to TNA's lawyers, what started as a friendly and somewhat conciliatory e-mail took a turn that was not only harsh, but constituted "terroristic threats" that forced the company to notify federal and state law enforcement agencies.

Cornette started off his e-mail by explaining to Taylor that he wishes him no ill and that he respects many of the TNA staffers, despite some of the screeds he has made that rip the promotion. He expressed his frustration with the direction Bischoff and Hulk Hogan have taken TNA. Then things took a weird turn.

"If not for one thing, I could move on with no hard feelings," Cornette wrote. "But that one thing is big, and is in danger of consuming my life if I don't just come out and say it ... I hate Vince Russo. I despise Vince Russo. I want Vince Russo to die. If I could figure out a way to murder him without going to prison, I would consider it the greatest accomplishment of my life."

It gets worse. From there, Cornette goes on to describe how he frequently wakes from dreams "in which I am in the act of murdering him." He vows to ruin Russo professionally and promises to either urinate on Russo's grave or to

haunt him, depending on which of them dies first.

The animosity between Russo and Cornette goes back more than a decade, and the reasons for Cornette's hatred are far too long to get into in this column (Cornette goes an additional 700 words on that topic in his e-mail alone). In essence, it boils down to this: He believes—and has believed for years—that the direction in which Russo has brought the business during his years with WWE, WCW, and now TNA has inflicted irreparable damage on the industry.

Clearly, Cornette went way over the line in his e-mail. Even if he were

sending that e-mail to a friend and not a former co-worker, he should have used better judgment and expressed himself in a more professional fashion. His comments, frankly, are inexcusable.

But what bothers me most is that Cornette—one of the greatest booking minds in wrestling history—feels he needs to send threatening e-mails to enact change in the wrestling business. Cornette has always had an explosive temper, but he's also the guy who helped John Cena, Randy Orton, and Batista develop their skills in Ohio Valley Wrestling. From managing to booking to mentoring to commentary, Cornette is in the top two percent in each category, but



Jim Cornette's mouth once again defeated his brain when he sent TNA's Terry Taylor an e-mail detailing his hatred for Vince Russo. TNA promptly reported the message to the feds.

Photo by George Napolitano

BY LIZ HUNTER ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

he's burned most of his bridges and finds himself on the outside looking in. He is working with Ring of Honor, but that's just not the same. Cornette is coming off more like the Unabomber than a wrestling genius.

A few weeks after sending that e-mail, Cornette received a registered letter from TNA's lawyers. The letter (which Cornette posted in full on his site) said TNA had "intercepted" a copy of the e-mail and had alerted authorities

of Cornette's threats against Russo. It also reprimanded Cornette for revealing proprietary confidential information and warned that future violations may result in legal action.

Leave it to Eric Bischoff to stir things up even more. Bischoff responded to the mess by ripping Cornette on his Facebook page. "Cornette doesn't know any business," Bischoff wrote. "He is a low-rent con man that is only good at gaining the attention of the Internet wrestling community ... He never has nor ever will become part of a meaningful national promotion."

Bischoff may be right about Cornette's future, but he is showing a blatant disregard for the rich history of this business by trying to downplay the contributions of the three-time PWI Manager of the Year. Cornette was part of several meaningful national promotions (including WWE, WCW, and TNA itself). And, yes, Cornette may never work for a major promotion again, but the inspiration for his e-mail was a pure love for this business.

His methods are wrong. There can be no doubt about that. But Cornette worked for TNA long enough for company officials (Russo included) to know the difference between a misguided promo and an actual threat. According to TNA's lawyers, that is, unfortunately, irrelevant.

Their response sent to Cornette included the following. "We must assume the worst. Indeed, the language of the e-mail is so specific, unequivocal, and unconditional that Vince Russo (a TNA employee) has understandably experienced extreme fear for himself and his family."

My advice to Jim Cornette, a long-time friend: Take this no further. Lose this obsession. If you feel Vince Russo ruined the business or your life, don't let your emotions exacerbate the situation. It's time to let it go. □

Photo by Tom Szczerb/TNA Wrestling



Eric Bischoff is playing the wrong tune in portraying Cornette as anything less than one of the top talent-developers and promo men in the sport's history, opines Liz Hunter.

ON THE FARM

BY LOUIE DEE

A WILD SPRING in Tampa saw both of Florida Championship Wrestling's titles change hands, a slew of multi-generational grapplers make their marks, and a business announcement from WWE that affects at least a handful of current Florida mainstays.

GOLDEN SHENANIGANS. March was a month of change in Florida. But as migrating birds and 15 Major League Baseball teams prepared to head north, Justin Gabriel finally saw his near-record reign as FCW heavyweight champion go south.

His troubles started in early-February when Wade Barrett, also a WWE NXT

rival of Gabriel's, mysteriously attacked the South African champion during a match. Barrett claimed he "got a phone call" urging him "to take out" Gabriel and warned the champ to watch his back. But while keeping one eye on the sly Brit, Gabriel continued to fend off all challengers and even had perhaps one of the promotion's greatest matches ever with Kaval.

But it all came to an end on the March 28 edition of *FCW TV*, as Gabriel lost his title to Alex Riley in a three-way match also featuring Barrett. Toward the match's conclusion, Barrett hit Gabriel with his fireman's carry slam finisher—and then pulled Riley on top for the win.

Adding insult to ... uh, insult, Barrett's actions finally brought closure to the mystery surrounding his initial attack. Riley thanked Barrett in the ring after the win, and the following week the newly crowned titlist revealed himself to be the "mysterious benefactor" who had paid Barrett to attack Gabriel.

Riley then gave his British bounty hunter a final payment, but may have found more trouble than he bargained for

There's no shortage of intrigue in FCW! Wade Barrett informed Justin Gabriel that someone had called anonymously urging him to "take out" the FCW champion. Then Barrett (stomping Gabriel) did just that, setting up a title victory for Alex Riley, who turned out to be the man that placed the call.



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when Barrett told him "he better hope no one outbids [Riley] for my services."

Regardless of the fallout, Alex Riley is now the ninth champion in FCW history, with Gabriel's reign ending roughly six weeks shy of the record set by the inaugural champion, Jack Swagger.

ALL IN THE FAMILY. FCW is chock full of second- and third-generation superstars, and as of late they're making names for themselves at the expense of each other.

At a March 13 event, the FCW tag team championship went from one famous family to another when Jimmy and Jules Uso (the twin sons of Rikishi) defeated The Fortunate Sons duo of Joe Hennig and Brett DiBiase to claim the gold.

The loss only escalated tensions between The Fortunate Sons, who, after weeks of bickering, finally "officially" parted ways when Hennig attacked DiBiase during an interview with Abraham Washington in late-April.

With the former Fortunate Sons out of the picture, another family duo (and pair of former champs) quickly stepped up to challenge the Usos—that being Bo and Duke Rotundo, whose lineage includes father Mike, uncles Barry and Kendall Windham, and grandfather Blackjack Mulligan.

Also in the mix is FCW newcomer Orlando Colon, who signed a WWE developmental deal in early-March. Wrestling under the moniker Tito Nieves, the nephew of Puerto Rican legend Carlos Colon (and cousin of Carlito and Primo) has been teaming with Mexican import Hunico as of late in a quest to unseat the Usos.

Meanwhile, just days after watching his Polynesian Power Pack brethren claim gold, Donny Marlow (the son of Haku) was on the business end of the FCW television debut of yet another familial face—Richie Steamboat.

The "Little Dragon," who many longtime fans may remember first seeing as an infant in his father's arms at WrestleMania IV, made his initial appearance a successful one, pinning Marlow with his dad's signature flying bodypress.

AN INTER-CONTINENTAL IMPRESSION. A world away from Tampa, Mexican sensation Alberto Banderas may have earned himself a quick call-up to WWE after an impressive week in Europe.

Banderas, the son of legendary luchador Dos Caras, reverted to his father's ring name to wrestle a series of matches against Christian on Raw's April international tour. He may have been on the losing end of every match, but Banderas' performance was reported to have earned rave reviews from WWE brass and wrestlers alike.

Should he earn a full-time WWE roster spot, Banderas would become the second member of his family to do so, following his legendary uncle, Mil Mascaras, who was a Madison Square Garden mainstay in the late-1970s and also made a handful of appearances for WWE in 1997.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR NXT? In a press release issued in early-April, WWE announced that *Friday Night Smackdown* will be moving from MyNetworkTV to Syfy this October, while *WWE NXT* will be leaving the cable channel at the same time.

Rumors about *NXT*'s status were swirling at press time—with the potential outcomes ranging anywhere from cancellation to the show becoming a *wwe.com* exclusive. Regardless of what happens, though, *NXT* can always be credited for giving a handful of FCW mainstays a chance to shine.

David Otunga, who guest hosted an episode of *Raw* in April, has clearly



Photo by Matt Roberts

Richie Steamboat had an impressive FCW TV debut, beating Donny Marlow with a finishing move his dad, Rick, frequently used—the flying bodypress.

shown that he has the "it" factor, while Daniel Bryan has been afforded the opportunity to bring his "Internet Darling" (all rights to Michael Cole) self to the masses.

Beyond them, guys like Gabriel, Barrett, and Heath Slater have been able to gain better exposure than a stint in ECW 2.0 ever could have brought them.

The first 17-week season of *NXT* is tentatively set to wrap up early this summer, which means the property could lay dormant until a new home is determined.

While the format of *NXT* probably needs a tweak or two (including less Diva Search-esque segments such as the recent keg race), it would be a shame if that platform were completely taken away from the guys who have worked so hard for even the smallest break.

Either way "Down On The Farm" has their backs. □

THUMBS UP

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Thumbs Up to Bret Hart. For the first time in a very long time, Hart seems truly at peace with himself. After patching his issues with Shawn Michaels earlier this year—and vanquishing Vince McMahon at WrestleMania 26—most fans had to expect Hart would just go home to Calgary with nothing but fond memories of his brief return. Instead, Bret chose to stick around, aligning himself with The Hart Dynasty in their feud with The Big Show and The Miz. We applaud Bret for walking through WWE's door and staying a while. It's nice to see this legend having fun again.

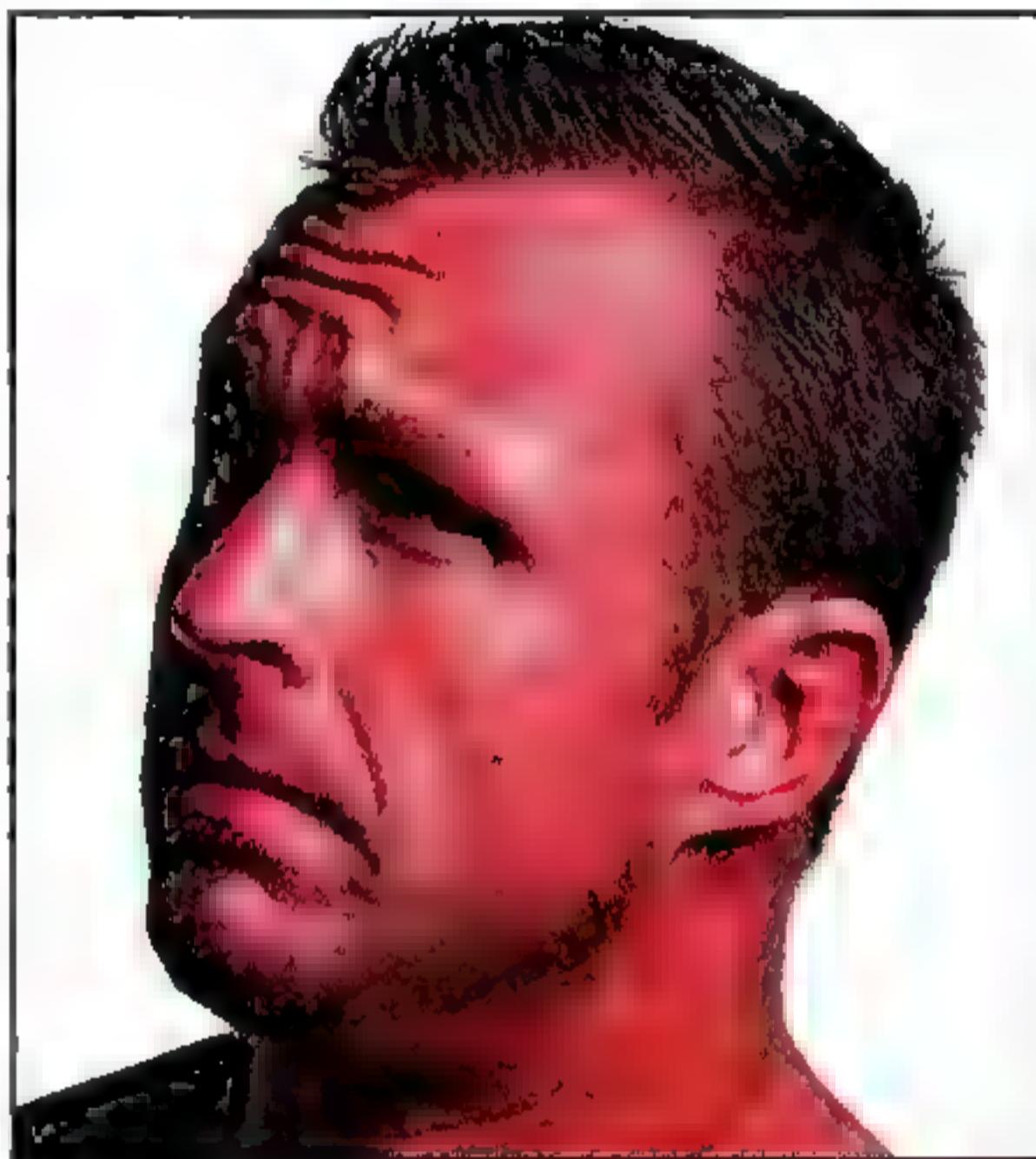


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

another dimension. The former British Invasion member attempted to establish a pure wrestling style that could distinguish the division from anything that TNA—or WWE—was offering. Even those who do not admire Williams' mat-based style have to admire his attempt to spice up X competition.

Shannon Moore might have considered Williams' style to be boring, but some thought it brought a necessary balance to the aerial style.

Photo by George Napolitano



Thumbs Up to Shawn Michaels. Michaels deserves all that he seeks out of life, even if it comes at the expense of those who adore seeing him perform. Even after watching HBK walk away, having lost a second close WrestleMania match to The Undertaker, no one can say he did not give professional wrestling all that was within him. We offer cheers to Shawn for recognizing there are others at home who need him more than we do, even if we'll miss "The Showstopper" terribly.



Photo by Wayne McCarty

tion on Raw, Swagger has finally made his pitch to be a main-eventer on WWE programming. By winning this year's WrestleMania Money in the Bank ladder match and subsequently upsetting Chris Jericho for the World title a few days later, Swagger has made the case for his name to be mentioned in the same conversation as Jericho, Edge, and Cena. Some may blanche at giving Swagger his due credit, but his accomplishments must be recognized.

THUMBS DOWN

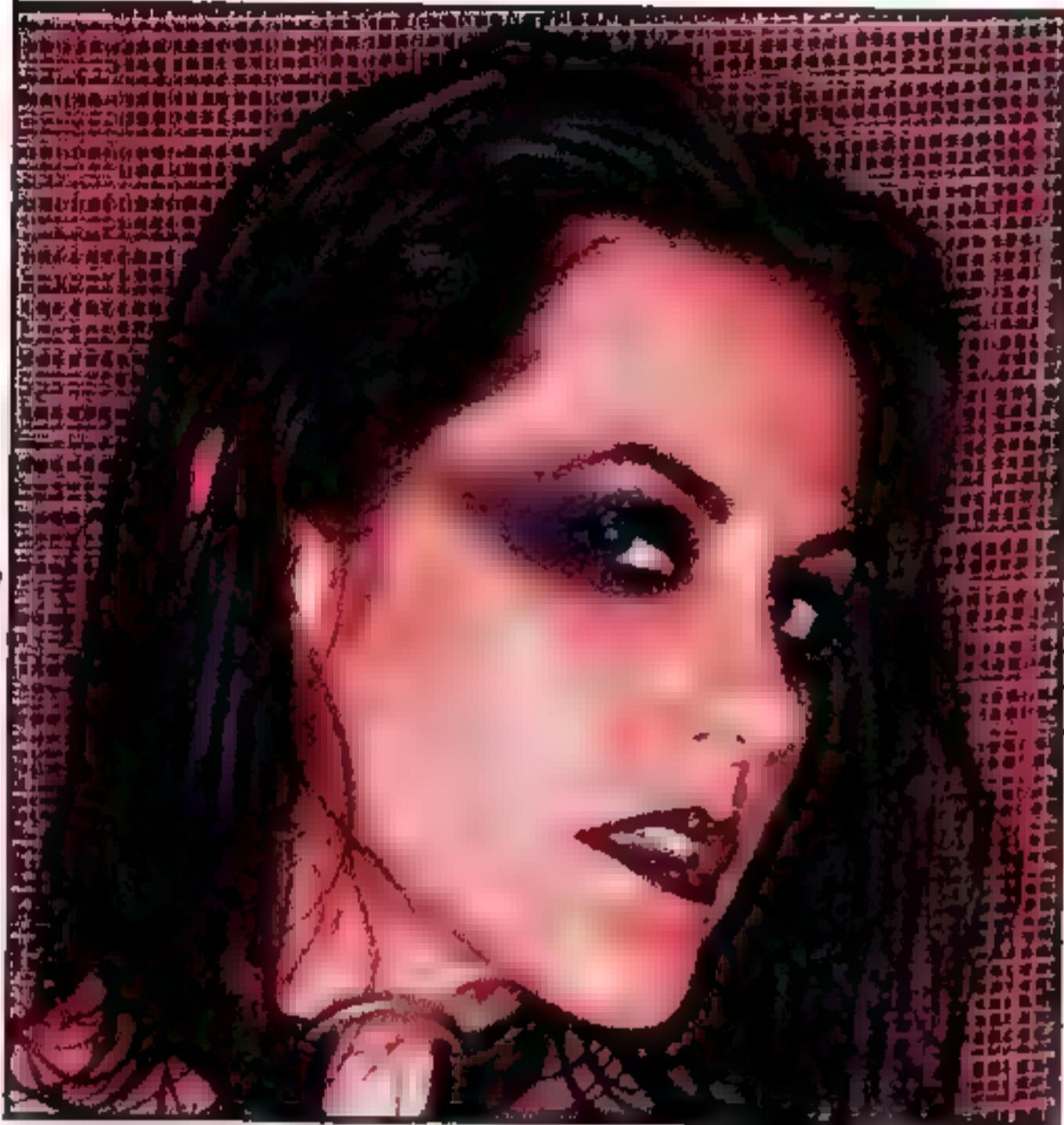


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Down to Daffney. As ill-conceived as the Knockouts Lockdown Showdown Elimination match in early-April was, Daffney came across as a bad sport for giving a reluctant, half-hearted "strip-tease" on *Impact*. Of course, we didn't expect "The Queen Of Scream" to disrobe entirely on prime time television, but she at least could have gone through the motions for the sake of her fans. Instead she made a blatant display of her disgust with the outcome. She shouldn't have participated in the bout unless she was prepared to honor the stipulations, no matter how humiliating they turned out to be.



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name for himself in WWE (and trying to actually earn a contract via *NXT*), would turn down the opportunity to win the WWE Unified tag title alongside WWE heavyweight champion John Cena. Strangely, this is exactly what Otunga did when he turned his back and walked away during a recent title match on *Raw*. Any fan would question the logic of turning down a shot at a championship, in favor of impressing men such as The Miz and Batista. After all, neither can get him any closer to a WWE contract.

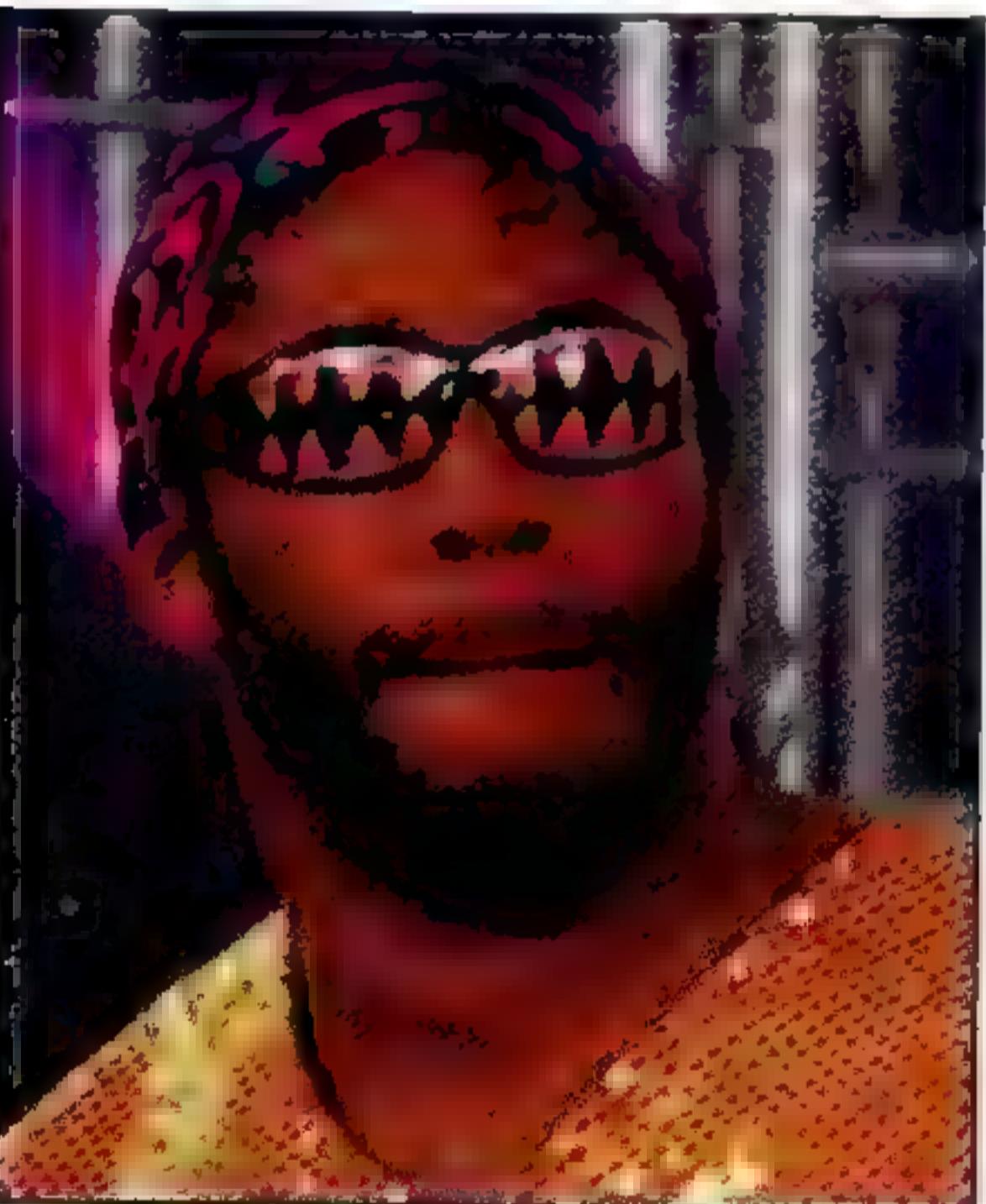


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Down to Jay Lethal. Even though Lethal has been imitating Randy Savage for years now, it seems each time he slips on the multi-colored sunglasses and hat he brings a little more ridicule upon himself. After all, Lethal was once a fine wrestler in TNA and other promotions long before "Black Machismo" was born. Is it unreasonable to think that with Savage's former friends Hulk Hogan and Eric Bischoff now in positions of power in TNA that Lethal would be shamed into proving he can offer so much more than just cheesy comedy?

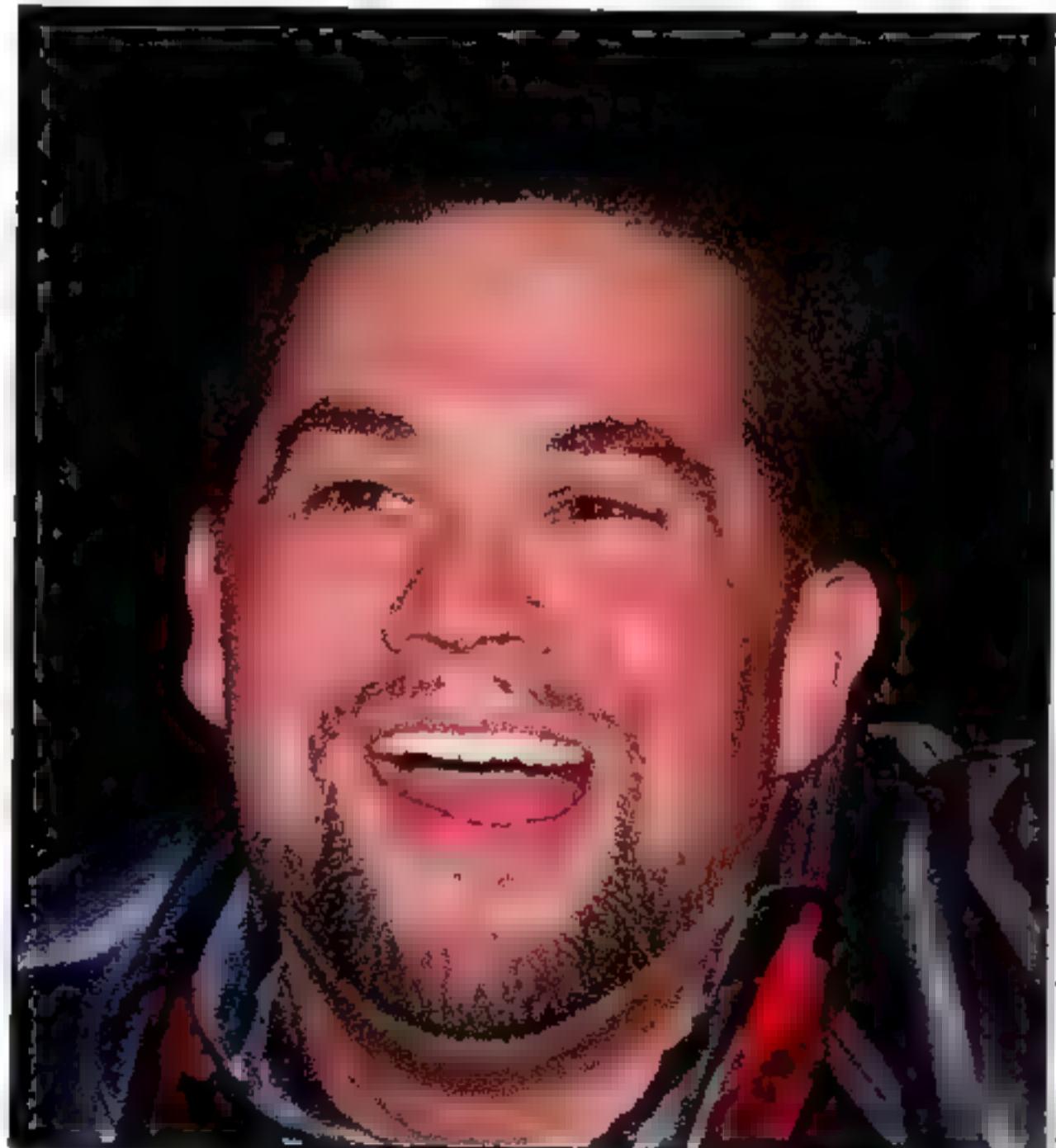


Photo by Scott Finkelstein

Thumbs Down to Shane Hagadorn. Ring of Honor boasts some of the best tag team competition in all of professional wrestling ... but no thanks to

Hagadorn, whose interference caused Jay and Mark Briscoe to lose the tag title to Chris Hero and Claudio Castagnoli in early-April. Hagadorn might have been doing what any good manager would do by sticking his nose in, but title matches should be contested without fear of interference from pests like Hagadorn. □

POINT:

TNA'S TV-14 RATING IS THE IDEAL SEPARATION POINT FROM WWE

BY AL ALVEN

REGARDLESS OF HOW Dixie Carter and company spin it (or "Tweet" it, as the case may be), TNA is fighting for survival on Monday nights. The decision to go head-to-head with WWE's *Raw* was made with the understanding that the tide of the ratings could not be turned overnight.

Still, the early returns have not been particularly promising, and TNA must consider ways to make inroads. Fundamentally, the company should be looking to distinguish itself from WWE programming, to provide the viable alternative that many fans crave.

A terrific opportunity to do so is there, and it lies with Vince McMahon's self-imposed PG-13 product rating. Regardless of his reasons for doing so—and Vince's methods for long-term planning are generally sound, whether we like them or not—WWE's shift to a more "family-oriented" direction has given TNA an opportunity to carve out its niche among wrestling fans.

Impact's TV-14 rating allows the company the leeway it needs to stand out. And, the leadership team of Hulk Hogan and Eric Bischoff appears willing to take advantage.

Since TNA left its Thursday night time slot behind, the product has taken on an edgier feel. We've seen a notable increase in the use of blood and sexual themes, calling to mind *Raw's* Attitude Era presentation, which WWE used to surpass WCW in the ratings at a time when things looked rather bleak for the Stamford company.

On *Impact*, blood has become commonplace, if not a staple of the show. Hogan, Ric Flair, and Abyss, are at the point where they regularly shed blood during live broadcasts. Meanwhile, it's difficult to recall the last time anyone bled during a WWE match. This isn't necessarily a knock on McMahon's current philosophy, but it is an example of a WWE restriction that TNA is wisely trying to exploit.

When featured judiciously, blood adds a realistic and emotional dimension to wrestling storylines. In much the same way, racier content has been proven to draw ratings.

TNA has never been shy about showcasing sex appeal, though the Knockouts division until recently has tended to focus more on match quality and the athletic abilities of its performers. While continuing to do so, viewers have also surely noted the increasingly over-the-top antics of The Beautiful People.

The in-your-face flavor TNA is looking to develop is, in fact, something more likely to appeal to fans still longing for a return to the finger-flipping days of "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin and the hardcore prime of ECW. The very least TNA can hope to accomplish is the feeling that anything can happen on *Impact*.

Over time, TNA will expand its fan base if it can stay on this path. It's all about creating a buzz, as the angle involving James Storm hitting Jeff Hardy with a fireball accomplished. The same applies to Mr. Anderson's brutal ladder match win over Kurt Angle, the ending of which saw Angle choked unconscious with his own "Warrior" medal.

Meanwhile, on *Raw*, Triple-H missed Sheamus with an exaggerated swing of a sledgehammer, conveniently hitting the announce table, which triggered a typical, WWE-style pyrotechnic "explosion."

Likewise, on the same night Lacey Von Erich performed her ballyhooed striptease on *Impact*, several WWE Divas were competing in a Dress to Impress battle royal. There is a difference.

If WWE is willing to lay the Attitude "ball" at TNA's feet, by all means TNA should pick it up and run with it. It is the best—and right now the only—way for TNA to distinguish itself from WWE.

Al Alven is a contributing writer for THE WRESTLER.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Now that WWE seems to have washed its hands of adult-oriented content, Al Alven says TNA should pick up where WWE left off because it is the easiest way for *Impact* to gain traction.

COUNTERPOINT:

COUNTERPOINT: TNA MUST GUARD AGAINST USING THE TV-14 RATING AS A CRUTCH

BY DAVE LENKER

FOR THE PAST few years, TNA has implored wrestling fans to "Cross The Line." Perhaps the company would be wise to avoid its own advice.

Now, there's nothing wrong with pushing the envelope, especially in the often-down and dirty world of professional wrestling. There's nothing wrong with presenting a grittier product, especially considering TNA's desire to carve out its own niche on Monday nights.

But, there also have to be limits. With regard to the lengths to which *Impact* pushes its TV-14 rating, the question that Hulk Hogan, Eric Bischoff, and Dixie Carter must ask themselves is: *Where do we draw the line between shock for the sake of instant gratification and long-term repercussions for the promotion?*

My colleague, Al, used an apt word when talking about the use of blood, rightly noting that it can be an effective tool when used "judiciously." Let us remember that Vince Russo is a member of the TNA Creative team, and history has shown that he has his own interpretation of that word.

I'll readily admit, I cringed when James Storm broke a beer bottle over RVD's head. My reaction the following week when Storm spit the fireball in Jeff Hardy's face was one of genuine horror. I was not expecting it, and I can't recall the last time something in wrestling shocked me as much as that did.

On many levels, it was truly disturbing, but I bet no one immediately changed the channel in disgust. Yes, it made an impact, pardon the pun, but for the wrong reasons.

Let's hope fireballs and beer bottles don't become staples in Storm's bag of tricks. Fans will become desensitized to their use and TNA will be forced to feature more dangerous and extreme spots to hold fans' interest. Similarly, if Lacey Von Erich and Daffney tease stripping too often, sooner or later fans will demand that one of them actually bare all, which in and of itself may

not be such a bad thing, but could escalate the raunch factor to the point of backlash.

Simply stated, TNA cannot fall into the trap of using a TV-14 rating as a crutch to improve *Impact*. The proper way to distinguish itself from WWE is to feature logically booked matches with clean finishes. The focus should be on what happens in the ring, not on tawdry gimmicks that get cheap pops.

Dave Lenker is a senior writer for THE WRESTLER.



Triple H's feud with Randy Orton was thrilling, though it featured little, if any, blood. Dave Lenker feels TNA can't rely too heavily on blood and sex if it hopes to succeed.

Courtesy of Impact Wrestling

INTRODUCING

MAXWELL CHICAGO



WHEN MAXWELL CHICAGO hears the boos of the crowd while making his ring entrance at independent wrestling cards in Florida, he considers it music to his ears. That's fine by him. If you're cocky and arrogant and you like to break the rules, the last thing you want is the fans' cheers or, worse yet, silence. But just in case his attitude and ring style aren't enough to rile the masses, he also provides music to the ears of the patrons.

Bad music. Actually, to be more precise, bad singing. In fact, if legendary songwriter Paul Anka were ever on hand to hear him kill "My Way," the 68-year-old might just do a run-in and clobber the 24-year-old upstart himself.

The 6', 205-pounder has just as high an opinion of his singing ability as he does his wrestling ability. He's actually half-right; he is a very good wrestler.

"I'm Florida's only true hybrid wrestler," he claims. "I'm the only one who provides two forms of entertainment: singing and wrestling. Look, I just want to give the fans their money's worth, so if I can sing and wrestle, that means they're getting two-for-one from the ticket they just paid for."

Though it's hard to discuss Chicago without going into his musical pursuits, it's impossible to ignore the fact that he is also extremely talented inside the squared circle. As of press time, Chicago held the ASW Multimedia championship, which he won in a hotly contested three-man match that included Bobby Fonda and Nooie Lee, a man Chicago considers to be one of the best light heavyweights in Florida.

BY AUBREY SITTERSON

PHOTOS BY ORLANDO MACCHIA

This lounge lizard is a fighting champion, as the nature of the title demands that he defend it every Friday night against some of the stiffest competition in Florida's active independent wrestling scene. Chicago is also a former GAWF junior heavyweight champion, having broken a record by wearing the belt 10 months.

Though he prefers singing solo, Chicago also boasts an impressive career as a tag team competitor. Working alongside Steve Goins as The Chi-Town Strike Team, the two fought their way all over Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, utilizing an impressive array of precision tag team maneuvers. Their dedication and determination paid off, as at one time they held and defended an astonishing seven tag team titles simultaneously. Pretty good for a young man whose early dream had nothing whatsoever to do with pro wrestling.

Chicago grew up a huge Chicago Blackhawks fan and aspired to play in the National Hockey League. Though he never really got close, he did earn a paycheck playing goalie for the Southern Professional Hockey League's Florida Seals. Later, he competed with the Florida Fusion as part of Major League Roller Hockey.

Ultimately, Chicago just was not cut out to be part of a team, so when he saw an article in the newspaper about Marty Jannetty's wrestling training school, he jumped at the opportunity to enroll.

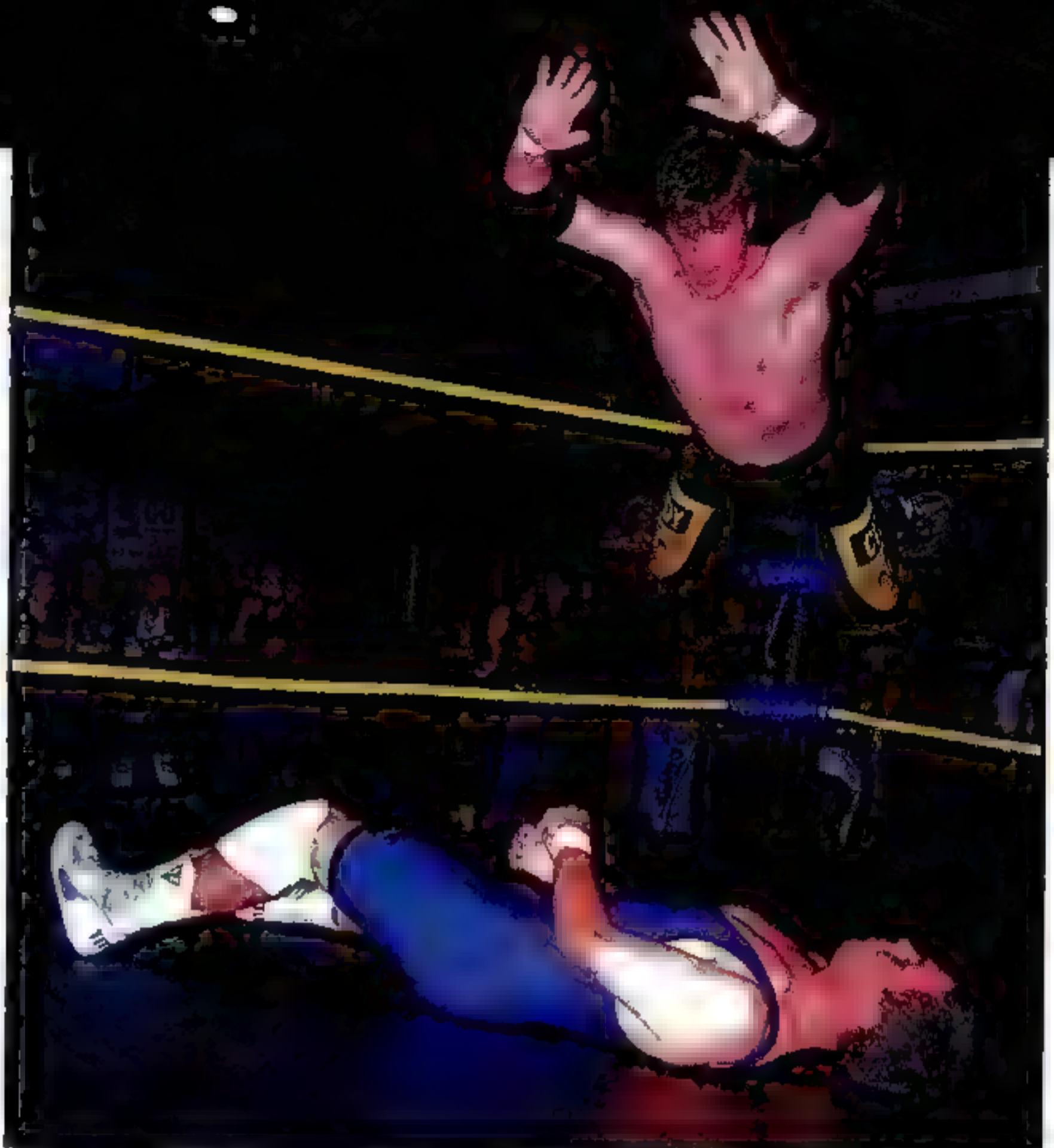
"He was one of my favorites growing up, so that was the sign I needed that pro wrestling was the way to go," Chicago said.

Though Chicago admits that Shawn Michaels' former Rockers partner was not as stern as many other wrestling trainers he had heard about, the lessons he learned from him were invaluable, starting with how to show the proper respect to the business and the other competitors in it. Before he could even get inside a ring for instance, Chicago had to learn how to build one.

From there, Jannetty taught the aspiring wrestler the basics, giving him an extraordinary amount of personal attention. One of Jannetty's lessons stood out more than the others, however: "He was always telling me that a bunch of moves are really cool, but you're not really wrestling to entertain yourself or the other wrestlers," he said. "You're out there to entertain the fans."

Though Chicago may have been star-struck when he began training with the former Rocker, now it's Jannetty's turn to be impressed. While many of Jannetty's other students—and even an assistant trainer—told Chicago he couldn't make it, the young man simply refused to give up. "Chicago became one of my favorite students in the way he stood there and displayed more courage and determination than most anyone else I've trained," Jannetty said.

Jannetty said he couldn't be more proud of his former



Maxwell Chicago's recent victims include T.J. Perkins, Buff Bagwell, and, in this instance, Bobby Fonta. The ASW Multimedia champ was a favorite student of Marty Jannetty, who was impressed by his determination to succeed against steep odds.

student. In fact, the former Rocker even sees a little bit of himself in Chicago, "who now tours around the country kicking ass and taking names, similar to what his old teacher did—rocking and rolling, strutting and strolling, slamming and jamming!"

Jannetty, along with the 1-2-3 Kid and Florida independent wrestler "Lights Out" Bobby Sanford, have been Chicago's biggest influences. Clearly, the example of these ring warriors has been a good one for the young competitor to follow, as he has recently come away with huge wins over both T.J. Perkins and Buff Bagwell. Chicago has also been heavily influenced by a fighter he has never even met: Jean-Claude Van Damme. His reverence for the "Muscles From Brussels" goes so far that he even borrowed Van Damme's nickname from the movie *Kickboxer*, Nack Suk Cao, which means "White Warrior" in Thai.

While he competes primarily in the Sunshine State, his heart is still in the Windy City. "There's nothing I love more than my hometown of Chicago," he said during a phone interview. "Right now I'm watching the Cubs game and when they hit a home run I was having a hard time staying serious because I was jumping up and down."

His love of Chi-Town extends into the squared circle as well, as many of his opponents have fallen victim to his devastating finishing maneuver, the Chicago Driver, a fittingly flashy version of the Ranhei or STO Driver.

Chicago continues to focus his energies in two directions—both wrestling and music. While working on tracks for his upcoming album, *That's Chicago!*, he made his debut in the NWA-sanctioned Florida promotion Pro Wrestling Fusion. He is nothing if not ambitious.

"When I look at the light heavyweights in Florida, I see a big void," he said. "There's something all these wrestlers are lacking, and that's entertainment value. That's what I'm all about. So get used to the name. You'll be seeing a lot of it."

WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

OUT OF STAMPS and don't have Dixie Carter's e-mail address handy. So why not?

Dear Dixie,

Each month, I try to make this column a collection of my strongest positive sentiments regarding the sport of pro wrestling. However, what I've seen from TNA recently on my TV screen makes that tough this month. I considered just writing about something else—WWE's push of Jack Swagger or Ring of Honor's second venture on Internet pay-per-view. But then I read something you wrote on TNA's website in response to a question from a fan about how you deal with criticism of your company. And I realized that I would be doing a disservice to our readers—and to you—if I held my tongue.

"There is a difference in someone who is passionate about TNA and wants to see something different versus someone who just hates the product (and won't give it a chance) and they want to complain," you wrote.

While I think it's important that you listen to all your critics, as opposed to dismissing those whose agendas you question, I'll indulge you.

You want to hear from someone who is passionate about TNA? Then who better to listen to than someone who has committed his life to covering the industry in which you work? Who better than someone who writes in the pages of the magazines read by the people you count on to buy tickets to your shows and order your pay-per-views? Who better than me?

As such, I hope you'll put some credence in my opinion when I tell you that, with all due respect, Ms. Carter, TNA is moving in the wrong direction.

While you may have hoped that 2010

would be the year that TNA really took off, quite the opposite has happened. The combined leadership of Hulk Hogan, Eric Bischoff, and head writer Vince Russo has so far proven to be a toxic mix. And at the pace they're going, you should be legitimately concerned about what the future holds.

I'm certain you are aware of the problems, but rather than address them, it seems you have chosen to turn a blind eye. You continue to rely exclusively on the small and undyingly loyal fan base for whom TNA can do no wrong, and on the people who have convinced you



What's wrong with this picture? If you ask Al Castle, he'll say it's the men in the ring. He feels grizzled vets such as Hogan and Flair get way too much exposure on *Impact*.



they know better than the legions of wrestling fans and insiders who see the writing on the wall—and are trying to make you see it as well.

With, perhaps, the exception of the consistently popular Knockouts division and guys like D'Angelo Dinero and Beer Money Inc., nothing seems to be working for TNA right now.

Rather than focusing on making stars out of talented TNA originals like Kazarian and Samoa Joe, you dedicate most of *Impact* to veterans of the original Monday Night War, like the Band, Hulk Hogan, Mick Foley, Ric Flair, and Sting, as well as most anyone who has the letters "WWE" on their resume.

You've made peculiar choices for some of the wrestlers you have chosen to elevate, such as the war-torn Abyss, the runtish Eric Young, and the awkward Rob Terry.

TNA storylines remain unnecessarily convoluted and illogical, with characters behaving inconsistently from one week to the next and story arcs that should take months to unfold wrapping up within a two-hour episode. Match stipulations are similarly inefficient and complex. If I never see wrestlers battle over a key again, it will be too soon.

Finally, the TNA product has become unnecessarily salacious. I understand some fans might want a healthy dose of adult content in their wrestling show, and may be turned off by WWE's PG-approach. But TNA has gone too far in the opposite direction. It seems as

though TNA now introduces blood just because WWE cannot. Wrestlers bleed during interviews. Faces are set on fire. And don't even get me started about what Orlando Jordan's boy toy licked off his chest.

Most offensive to me has been the apparent disregard for your wrestlers' welfare. After WWE and ROH both announced they had banned unprotected chair shots to the head, TNA has flaunted the fact that its wrestlers are still allowed—if not encouraged—to continue to engage in such unnecessarily dangerous behavior.

I commend you for wanting to offer fans an alternative to WWE, although there is some irony to that considering the number of ex-WWE employees on your payroll. But the fact is, WWE has upped its game in recent months, featuring a core of established and talented top stars, a strong supporting cast of young up-and-comers, storylines built on championship hunts and battles for respect, and no unnecessary shortcuts like screaming interviews, gratuitous sex, and bloodbaths.

In light of this, I'm compelled to ask, why would WWE fans want to "cross the line" when what they have now is superior to what TNA is offering?

I won't be so arrogant as to offer you a strategy for turning around TNA's fortunes. But before you toss this letter in the "What do they know?" pile, I hope you'll take a moment to consider my opinion.

See, I am "passionate" about TNA. I passionately would love to see TNA make an important contribution to the sport I love. I'd like nothing more than for TNA to put out an enjoyable product that challenges WWE and creates a competitive marketplace in which everyone, especially the fans, would benefit.

And I'm passionate when I tell you that what TNA is doing right now is failing, and I fear that if your company continues on this path, you are going to lose more and more of those diehards whose opinions you trust the most.

Sincerely,
Al Castle

SPOTLIGHT ON . . .

REY MYSTERIO JR.



March 1996: Resumes his AAA feud with Juventud Guerrera shortly after Juvi travels to the Land of Extreme.

BORN IN CHULA VISTA, California, on December 12, 1974 ... Trained by his uncle, Rey Mysterio Sr. ... Made pro debut in Mexico in 1989 ... Wrestled early in his career as Green Lizard, El Nino, and Colibri (Spanish for hummingbird) ... Eventually took the name of his uncle, with whom he often teamed ... Began a feud with Psicosis that would last for many years and would be featured in various promotions in Mexico and the United States ... Debuted in AAA in 1992 ... Began rivalry with Juventud Guerrera ... Captured National welterweight title, defeating Fantasma de la Quebrada ... Defeated Guerrera for the WWA lightweight title ... Teamed with his uncle against Guerrera and his father, Fuezra Guerrera ... Won national trios title with Super Muneco and Octagon, defeating Vulcano, Tony Arce, and Rocco Valente ... Traded WWA welterweight title reigns with Psicosis ... Earned international renown on several tours of Japan ... Debuted in Extreme Championship Wrestling in 1995 after being heavily pursued by Paul Heyman ... Series of lucha-style matches against Psicosis wowed ECW Arena crowd in Philadelphia ... Defeated Psicosis in much-praised Mexican Death Match, which featured a combination of lucha and hardcore action ... Went on to feud with Guerrera in ECW upon his arrival from AAA ... Highlight of one match between the two saw Mysterio execute a hurricanrana on Guerrera onto a car in the parking lot of the ECW Arena ... Signed with WCW in mid-1996 ... Debuted against cruiserweight champion Dean Malenko at The Great American Bash ... Lost, but only due to Malenko's cheating ... Defeated longtime rival Psicosis at Bash at the Beach to become number-one contender to Malenko ... Defeated Malenko for the championship the

REY MYSTERIO JR.



Photo by George Napolitano



October 1996: Despite moments of brilliance, Mysterio drops the WCW cruiserweight title to Dean Malenko at Halloween Havoc.

following night on *WCW Monday Nitro* ... Enjoyed a three-month reign, which included successful defenses against Ultimo Dragon, Super Calo, and Malenko ... Dropped the belt back to Malenko at Halloween Havoc ... Unsuccessfully challenged Ultimo Dragon for the J-Cup championship at World War 3 ... Feuded briefly with WCW TV champion Prince Iaukea ... Engaged in rivalry with cruiserweight champion and longtime friend Eddie Guerrero ... Defeated Guerrero in a title-vs.-mask match at Halloween Havoc ... Lost the belt back to Guerrero only days later ... Defeated Juventud Guerrera for third reign as cruiserweight champ in early-1998 ... Lost it nine days later to Chris Jericho at Souled Out ... Missed six months of action due to a knee injury ... Returned to defeat Jericho for the title at Bash at the Beach ... Result was overturned the following night due to interference in the match by Malenko ... Repeatedly refused Guerrero's requests to join the Latino World Order, a takeoff of the NWO ... Was eventually forced to join after losing stipulated match to Guerrero ... Feuded with LWO members from within the group, helping Billy Kidman beat Juventud Guerrera for the cruiserweight title at Starrcade ... Finally bonded with LWO



March 1997: Mysterio engages in a feud with WCW TV champion Prince Iaukea.

members when a reformed NWO demanded that the group disband ... Was forced to remove his mask after he and partner Konnan lost mask-vs.-hair match to Kevin Nash and Scott Hall at SuperBrawl IX ... Later publicly stated he was vehemently against the move, feeling it damaged his character ... Became a "giant killer," defeating such super heavyweights as Nash, Bam Bam Bigelow, and Scott Norton ... Beat Kidman to become a four-time cruiserweight champ ... Teamed with Kidman to defeat Chris Benoit and Dean Malenko for the WCW World tag team title, making him a double-champion ... Traded cruiserweight strap with Psicosis ... Lost tag title to Raven and Perry Saturn at Slamboree ... Joined Konnan as a member of rapper Master P's No



January 1998: Sans mask, Mysterio joins his friend Konnan in Master P's No Limit Soldiers faction to fight the West Texas Rednecks.



March 1999: Though they would win the WCW World tag team title together two weeks later, Mysterio defeats Billy Kidman to win his fourth WCW cruiserweight title.

Limit Soldiers in feud against the West Texas Rednecks ... After Master P's departure, formed the Filthy Animals stable with Guerrero and Kidman ... Konnan would later join the group ... Lost the cruiserweight title in upset to Lenny Lane ... Teamed with Konnan to win tag team title from Harlem Heat ... Sidelined with knee injury as Konnan and substitute Kidman lost belts back to Booker T and Stevie Ray ... Joined the New Blood faction upon his return, feuding with the Millionaire's Club ... Teamed with Guerrero to beat The Great Muta and Vampiro for the World tag team title ... Duo was stripped due to odd stipulation when Ernest Miller beat Disco Inferno in a singles match ... Filthy Animals engaged in feuds with the Natural Born Thrillers, Boogie Knights, and Team Canada factions ... With Kidman lost in finals of tournament to crown first WCW cruiserweight tag team champions to Elix Skipper and Kid Romeo ... Duo beat Skipper and Romeo on final episode of *Monday Nitro* to win the belts ... Wrestled briefly for the short-lived XWF ... Made several appearances for CMLL in Mexico, wrestling without his mask ... Competed in three-way IWA: Mid-South championship match against C.M. Punk and Eddie Guerrero, in match won by Guerrero ... Signed with WWE in June 2002 ... Debuted on *Smackdown* with a win over Chavo Guerrero Jr. ... Teamed with Edge to defeat Kurt Angle and Chris Benoit for the tag team title

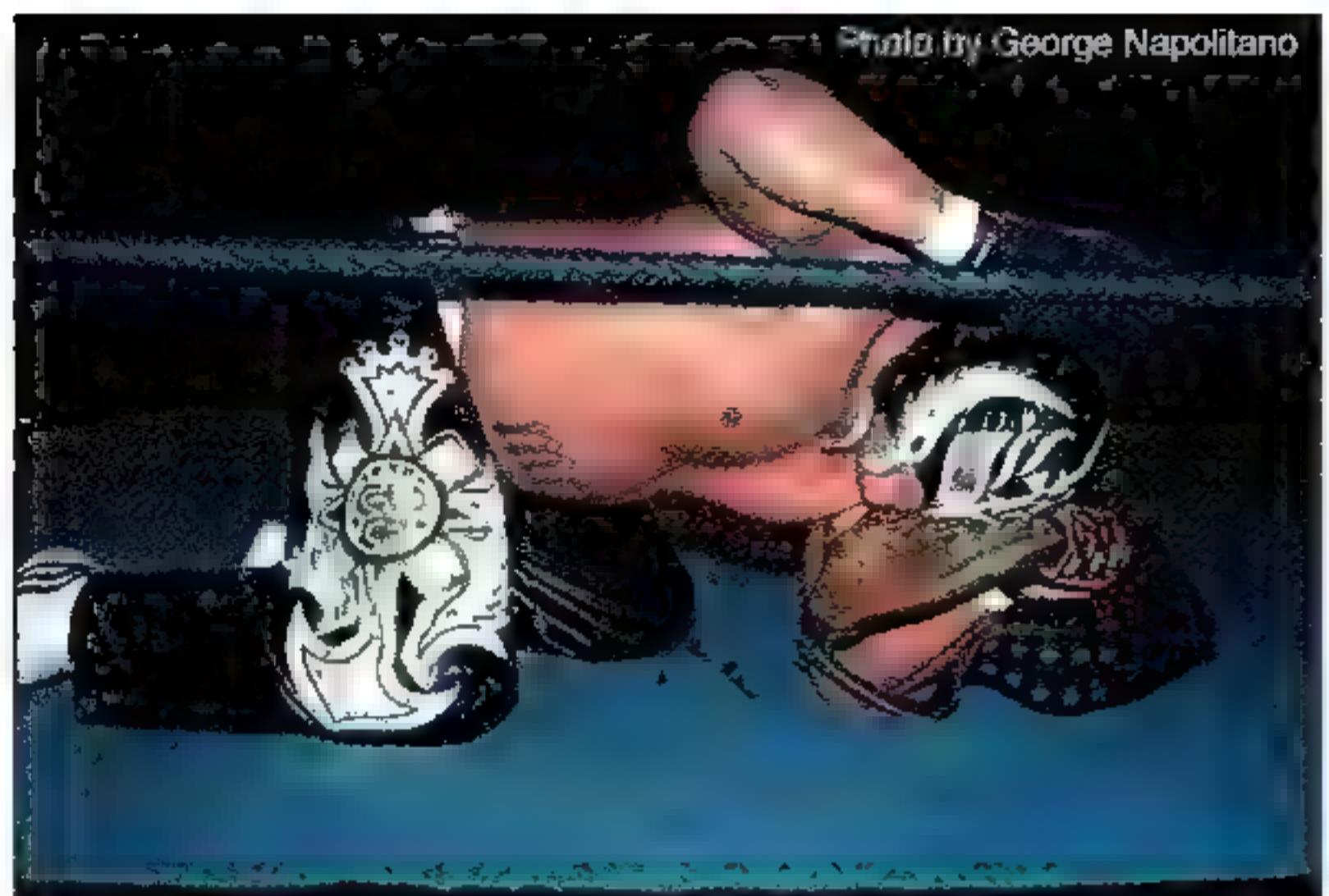
... Lost belts to Los Guerreros 12 days later ... Failed in attempt to take WWE cruiserweight title from Matt Hardy at WrestleMania XIX, due to interference from Shannon Moore ... Went on to defeat Hardy for the championship several weeks later on *Smackdown* ... Lost and regained the title from Tajiri ... Dropped title to Chavo Guerrero Jr. at *No Way Out '04* ... Defeated Chavo Classic (Chavo Guerrero Sr.) for record-setting eighth cruiserweight title win (WCW and WWE reigns combined) ... Dropped title to Spike Dudley ... Formed team with Rob Van Dam ... Won tag team title from Kenzo Suzuki and Rene Dupree ... Lost belts to The Basham Brothers, but quickly regained them, this time with Eddie Guerrero as partner ... In departure from the norm, tag champs wrestled each other at WrestleMania 21, with Mysterio winning ... Lost title to M-N-M after being attacked by Guerrero ... Bitter feud that ensued saw both men battle over the custody of Mysterio's real-life son Dominik ... Mysterio won ladder match to settle the matter at *SummerSlam* ... Gave emotional speech and dedicated the rest of his career to



July 2002: Debuts on WWE *Smackdown* with a victory over Chavo Guerrero Jr.



December 2004: With Rob Van Dam defeats the team of Kenzo Suzuki and Rene Dupree on *Smackdown* to win the WWE tag team title.



April 2006: Mysterio embraces the WWE heavyweight title belt he won by defeating Randy Orton and Kurt Angle in a triple-threat match at WrestleMania 22.



March 2010: Fueled by C.M. Punk's harassment of his family, Mysterio takes the action to the straight-edge devotee. Mysterio would defeat Punk after hitting a 6-1-9.

Guerrero, who was found dead on November 13, 2005 ... Defeated Shawn Michaels in an tribute match to his fallen friend ... Feuded with The Big Show after eliminating him at Survivor Series ... Teamed with Batista to beat M-N-M for the tag team title ... Lost belts back to M-N-M due to interference from Mark Henry ... Set a record by lasting more than 62 minutes in the Royal Rumble ... Won the match, last eliminating Randy Orton, to earn WWE heavyweight title shot at WrestleMania 22 ... Lost title shot against Orton at No Way Out after Orton cheated ... Smackdown GM Teddy Long added Mysterio to triple-threat match at WrestleMania against champion Kurt Angle and Orton ... Mysterio pinned Orton to win his first world title ... Celebrated afterward with Chavo Guerrero Jr. and Eddie Guerrero's widow, Vickie ... Was billed during reign as an underdog champion, barely surviving encounters with Orton, Mark Henry, The Great Khali, and John Bradshaw Layfield ... Feuded intensely with JBL, who repeatedly insulted Mysterio's Mexican heritage ... Retained title against Sabu when both men were unable to continue at One Night Stand ... Lost championship to King Booker at The Great American Bash after being attacked by Chavo Guerrero Jr. ... Fell to Guerrero in an "I Quit" match ... Was forced out of action for months after knee surgery ... Defeated Guerrero in return match, as well as a subsequent "I Quit" return revenge bout ... Feuded with WWE heavyweight champion Khali and Finlay ... Beat Finlay in a stretcher match at Cyber Sunday ... Would again miss months of action due to a biceps tear ... Drafted to Raw upon his return ... Disappeared briefly after being attacked by Kane ... Got the best of Kane in an extended feud ... Defeated (and retired) JBL at WrestleMania 25, winning the Intercontinental title in 21 seconds ... In doing so, became the 21st man to win the WWE Triple Crown ... Drafted back to Smackdown, where he would feud with Chris Jericho ... Lost title to Jericho, but regained it in mask-vs.-title match at The Bash ... Suspended for 30 days due to Wellness Policy violation ... Publicly claimed no wrongdoing, stating that he held a prescription, which he was unable to produce while on vacation and promotional tour ... Lost Intercontinental title to John Morrison ... Came up short in attempts to win Unified tag team title (with Batista) and WWE World title upon return ... Feuded with Batista after an enraged "Animal" turned on him ... Fell to WWE World champion Undertaker at the Royal Rumble ... Pinned C.M. Punk in the Elimination Chamber, kicking off a feud with the Straight Edge Society ... Punk made the feud personal by crashing birthday party for Mysterio's daughter, Aalyah, on Smackdown ... Defeated Punk at WrestleMania 26 in match where Mysterio would have been forced to join the S.E.S. had he lost ... Continues to be one of the most popular performers on Smackdown and a perennial challenger for all titles. □

Q & A

TRISH STRATUS

"I wanted a new style of women's wrestling"

TRISH STRATUS COULDN'T have asked for a better farewell from the sport. In her retirement match on September 17, 2006, Stratus defeated longtime rival Lita ... with the sharpshooter ... for an unprecedented seventh WWE Women's title ... on pay-per-view ... in her hometown of Toronto ... and retired with the championship belt.

Talk about a storybook ending. Even Shawn Michaels and Ric Flair sustained big losses in their final WWE matches. Yet Stratus was treated like a lady—and a legend—at the end of her WWE career. It was a classy goodbye for the sexy sensation who had led women's wrestling to its zenith in the early-2000s, and, in historical hindsight, the most significant female wrestler since The Fabulous Moolah.

But just because Stratus went out in a blaze of glory doesn't mean she faded into the sunset. Although Trish dreamed of relaxation and marital bliss after her amazing WWE career, she quickly delved into a number of other roles, starring on the reality series *Armed & Famous* on CBS, host of *The Second City's Next Comedy Legend* on the CBC, and co-producer of *Stratusphere*, a travel-documentary series on Canada's Travel + Escape and Discovery HD networks. She returned to Raw on December 22, 2008, and teamed with John Cena to defeat Beth Phoenix and Santino Marella in the main event. More recently, Stratus acted as guest host of Raw September 14, 2009, where she again faced off against Beth Phoenix and her partner, long-time rival Chris Jericho.

Stratus recently completed shooting for *Bail Enforcers*, an action film in which she plays a bounty hunter. She underwent rigorous fight training in preparation for the role. The movie features Stratus at her best: kicking butt and looking good while doing it. *Bail Enforcers* (bailenforcersmovie.com) is due for release in late-2010.

Away from the cameras, Stratus has equal passion for yoga, which she discovered while rehabilitating the numerous injuries she accumulated during her wrestling career. Today, she is the owner and operator of *Stratusphere* (stratusphereyoga.com) in Vaughan, Ontario. She continues to make the covers of magazines in North America, with this particular *WRESTLER* cover bringing her to a grand total of 76. She is also involved in numerous charities throughout the world. It's hard to keep track of the stunning blonde-turned-brunette, so make sure to check out trishstratus.com for the latest happenings.

In this exclusive interview, Stratus addresses a wide array of topics, including her meteoric rise in fitness modeling, her uncertain start in WWE, her part in the resurrection of the women's division, her thoughts on the Divas of today, and whether she will return to the industry. "I was pleasantly surprised by Trish's answer to that question," commented Senior Writer Harry Burkett, who grilled the WWE legend for 90 minutes. "She didn't go into specifics, but I think our readers will be intrigued by her response. I don't think the wrestling world has heard the last from Trish Stratus."

Q: I'm glad we're finally able to do this interview, considering you've been very busy over the past month. I understand you were working on a movie, correct?

A: Yes, I filmed an action movie, a Canadian production. I play a bounty hunter and I kick a lot of butt. Even though I'm retired, I keep going back to this butt-kicking thing. The fight coordinator gave each actor a specific fight background so we could really get into our roles. I was trained in Krav Maga, a fighting style that was developed for the Israeli Special Forces. I appreciated the fact that the fights were coordinated to make them true to each character. I have several awesome fight scenes with my nemesis in the movie.

Q: Are you telling me that some fugitive got the Chick Kick?

A: I can't disclose any information at this time, but I can guarantee some Stratus-faction, wink, wink. The director and writer of the movie had followed my career, and apparently I was the inspiration for the lead role—as this strong female who can kick butt. They didn't think they'd get me for the part, but somehow the script landed on my desk—and the shooting was taking place locally, so I didn't have to leave the Toronto area.

Q: How physically demanding was this role, compared to your career in wrestling?

A: Let me explain it this way: Have you seen my travel show?

Q: Stratusphere, right?

A: I'm glad you've done your research [laughs]. The premise of the show is me kicking butt while exploring the cultures and histories of various locations around the world. To name a few, I learned *Gilma*, a form of wrestling, which is the national sport in Iceland, swordfighting in India, and Muay Thai boxing in Thailand. While shooting the movie, I got the opportunity to pick up yet another new fighting technique and although it comes



In her role as Jules Taylor in the movie *Bail Enforcers*, Stratus hardly looks like a butt-kickin' bounty hunter. Then again, nobody thought she would end up a butt-kickin' wrestler!



Stratus and Traci Brooks spar at Sully's Gym under the watchful eye of trainer Ron Hutchinson. Not only did Hutchinson train Trish, he prepared her for what the life of a wrestler is all about.



Albert and Test were both extremely helpful to Stratus in her early career development, though with radically different ways of expressing themselves. Test was critical; Albert was encouraging.

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naturally because I already have body awareness for doing that, my body definitely reminded me I hadn't done it in a while! I was in fight training for two weeks before shooting even began and then keeping up the film schedule and actually then performing the fight scenes. I hadn't felt body pain like that since I did a European road trip followed by a pay-per-view and a couple of *Raws* in a row. I had quite a few bruises!

Q: You mentioned your yoga studio. When did you discover yoga?

A: I discovered yoga right after Viscera squished me during our feud with Kane and Lita. During that time with Viscera, I was diagnosed with a herniated disk and couldn't work at the time, and I couldn't even sit on a plane for more than 30 minutes without a lot of pain. I hurt the lower L4 and L5 vertebrae of my back. That storyline allowed me to have a non-physical role and to develop my character. I was able to exit the scene for a couple months after the incident with Viscera.

The doctor recommended surgery, but I wanted to rehabilitate it. I rehabilitated for two months and nothing was happening. WWE was calling for me to come back, but I couldn't even walk on a treadmill. Amy (Lita) Dumas had broken her neck while filming *Dark Angel* and she had discovered hot yoga, which allowed her to have mobility in her neck and spine. So I started yoga, and I started moving better with less pain within a week. I loved it so much and made so much progress that I stopped traditional physical therapy and did yoga for 2½ straight months and reversed the damage. Then I returned for a babyface pop with Ashley, and took care of Victoria, Torrie, and Gail Kim, who were wreaking havoc at the time!

Q: I suppose someone should do some sort of yoga intervention for Mick Foley and Terry Funk! What do you bring to your yoga studio that makes it unique?

A: While on the road, I sought out yoga studios around the world—Australia, Ireland, and all over the States. When I retired, I took a teacher's training course to become certified in *ashtanga*, a discipline of yoga, after attending a yoga retreat in Italy. After seeing the positive effects yoga had on my life, both physically and mentally, I felt like everyone should be able to feel this great! There are so many styles which all address different needs—like with me how I used yoga to rehabilitate my back and now I use it to maintain my fitness—so I envisioned a place that has something for everyone. Stratusphere is 5,200 square feet of yoga bliss: three studios, a lounge, and over 40 classes a week. Come visit and do yoga with me!

Q: That sounds very interesting, but you could barely get me to do push-ups.

A: Maybe you should visit Stratusphere and you'll be inspired to do yoga. You'd be surprised at the diverse types of people that we have doing yoga. A surprising amount of men. I created and launched a "Yoga For Golfers" sequence and members of the Toronto Argonauts and the Toronto Maple Leafs helped open that up.

Q: Moving on to wrestling, do you have the chance to follow WWE or TNA very closely?

"Test was really adamant on making me earn his respect. He didn't want to give me too much credit and made sure I knew it when I made a mistake. Albert would tell me not to worry and that I was fine. It was a good mix. Test would say I sucked, and that I'd have to improve."

A: Yes, I record *Raw* every week and I also follow TNA quite closely as well—mostly I keep up online.

Q: You must still have a lot of friends throughout wrestling in both major companies who give you the behind-the-scenes scoop on what's going on. What's your take on wrestling today?

A: Hmm. I have a lot of friends on the Divas roster, and a lot of them yearn for the women's division of past years. It gets discouraging with the lack of storylines, and I tell them it's only a matter of everyone finding the right spot at the right time. But most of the people I keep in touch with have also left the business at this point.

Q: You were a fitness model before you got into wrestling, right?

A: I was a career student getting ready for med school and doing everything in my power to get my resume ready by volunteering at the hospital and doing other medical jobs to prepare. Fitness modeling was a fluke. In my third year at university, in '97, the professors went on strike. I was lucky to meet Robert Kennedy, the publisher of *Oxygen* and *MuscleMag*. Up to that time in the fitness industry, women were bodybuilders and considered more on the masculine side. Robert is a bit like Vince McMahon, because he's a marketing genius, and he



Interview photos by Paul Wright

focused on people who were athletic and very feminine, and fitness contests became the new thing. He put me under contract just as the fitness modeling industry was blossoming. My first cover was the September 1998 issue of *MuscleMag*. He introduced me as the "hottest and newest fitness model," and my career took off. So I had a career as a fitness model for a couple of years before I got into the wrestling industry.

Q: But you were somewhat of a wrestling fan. Did you grow up wanting to be Miss Elizabeth?

A: No, actually, I wanted to be "Macho Man." I used to have tag team matches with my cousins who I would go to watch



Stratus' long feud with Lita elevated the status of women's wrestling from that of an "added attraction" to the equivalent of male wrestling of the highest order. They were serious athletes who worked as hard at perfecting their craft as looking good doing it. (Okay, there was the occasional bra and panties match, but this was the Attitude Era after all!)



With future senatorial candidate Linda McMahon looking on from her wheelchair in a near catatonic state, Trish slaps Vince across the face, showing the fans that she is worthy of more than their pity for the way she had been mistreated.



"Bark like a dog!" McMahon commands Trish after their brief on-screen affair had come to an end. As uncomfortable as that scene was to watch, Trish was thrilled to play the role of the victimized, humiliated woman and calls working with McMahon the turning point in her career.



"I guess everyone realized I was a team player when I would take a chokeslam from Kane, I was cool with getting the stinkface, and I didn't mind getting tossed over the top rope by The Big Show."

wrestling with at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto back in the day. I really got back into it when the NWO started. At the time, there was a show on TSN in Canada called *Off The Record*, which featured celebrity sports guests discussing current issues in sports. I was invited on because I had been on the cover of *MuscleMag*, but they soon discovered that I knew sports and wrestling.

Q: Wasn't *Off The Record* the show where Bret Hart would often share his soul?

A: Yes, that show became a friend of wrestling fans. I was the go-to guest to talk wrestling. The turning point was when TSN and WWE made a big announcement that *Raw* was going to be seen prime time at 9 p.m. There was a press conference at the SkyDome, and I got to meet all the wrestlers backstage at *Raw*. The coolest moment was meeting Mick Foley. He said, "Oh my God, I'm such a fan. I have your cover up in my gym." Then an Internet rumor got started thereafter, suggesting I was going to debut soon. Remember, the Internet was new in '99, and wrestling hopped right on board.



Q: Wrestling was the first big thing on the Internet. Sunny was the most downloaded person on AOL!

A: Exactly. All the galleries and news boards that discussed women's wrestling were saying I had signed with the WWF. I was tickled by it all, and that's basically how *Live Audio Wrestling* came about. I loved being the chick co-host. I'd



Trish earned the respect of the locker room early on for her willingness to take bumps from men like Kane (opposite page far left) and Buh Buh Ray Dudley (opposite page left), even if doing so necessitated medical care (below).

Trish thrashes Lita during an Indian Strap Match in New York. A contentious relationship eventually turned into one of mutual respect.



talk about rumors and take some calls. It's now on Sirius radio and I still go on because they're my boys.

Q: That kills the stereotype, doesn't it? So many fitness models and aspiring actresses come into wrestling, bestowing us with their presence, but don't have much respect for it. But you were a fan from the beginning.

A: That's why it turned out different for some of them—what, did I really say that? I felt like I knew how to wrestle before I actually knew how to wrestle. One time when WWF was at the SkyDome, there was a sports show that was featuring some of the wrestlers as part of the build-up and Michael Hayes was doing live throws for the Canadian programming. I was a guest on this show along with Carl DeMarco, the former president of WWF Canada, and they both encouraged me to send in my press kit.

So I compiled my fitness covers and sent stuff to the WWF. Then I got to work preparing the best possible package if the call ever came. I literally knocked on the door of Ron Hutchinson's school—where Edge and Christian trained—and said I wanted train. He laughed because he thought I was someone else who wanted to be the next Sable. Traci Brooks was also in my class, believe it or not.

Q: You're very much a pioneer in that regard. Now whenever we think of Ron Hutchinson's school, we think of the

female wrestlers—you, Traci Brooks, and Gail Kim—as much as the male wrestlers.

A: He's a great guy and was very integral to all of our careers. He gave us the inside scoop and got our heads prepared for what this industry is.

Q: He must have told you that things don't necessarily happen on the timetable you expect. Like receiving your contract, from what I understand.

A: Right. Terry Taylor was handling my press kit at WWF and he called and apologized for the delay, but he explained there were hiccups and transitions going on, and that he and Vince Russo were skipping to WCW. As a courtesy, he put my file on Jim Ross' desk, but warned that if WWE didn't take me, then WCW would. So WWE and WCW got into a bidding war. The WWF gave me an offer, and WCW gave me an offer, and then the little start-up extreme group of ECW got a hold of me and Paul Heyman talked to me a bit. It was really crazy that I was talking to all these companies and I was in demand. WWE flew me in to Connecticut and had me picked up in a limo, and then I got to meet Jim Ross.

Q: Down to headquarters in a limo ... that was cool.

A: Every moment before I signed the contract was an absolute dream and surreal.

Q: Did they put you through any other training after you got the contract?

"People think I must have felt humiliated. Are you kidding? Look at the result. I was simply an actress doing a part which allowed me to show emotion—that's a good thing."

A: Amy and I signed at about the same time, and she got the opportunity to train a little bit at WWE headquarters. I would've as well, but I didn't have a visa at the time. Luckily, the visa issue didn't keep me from going on my first Diva shoot in the Dominican Republic, though. I was with Ivory, The Kat, and Terri Runnels before I had even debuted—they were like "who is this chick?" They knew I had modeling experience from the fitness world, which was cool, but they warned me that the wrestling world was very different. Ivory was straight up with me about the difficulties ahead.

I had signed my deal in November 1999 and my visa didn't go through until March 2000. They flew me out for a couple of weeks to be on the road. On a trip to New York City, I brought my sister and boyfriend (now husband) along, thinking it'd be neat to make a trip of it. Turns out that was the week I ended up making my debut! I remember we were at the Meadowlands in New Jersey and sent me to the nearby mall to get an outfit.



Q: Is that where you bought the white cowboy hat and white boots?

A: No, let me clarify that. It was actually a pink cowboy hat. I made my debut on *Sunday Night Heat*, scouting Test and scouting Albert. I wanted to be a character, so I wanted some-

Stratus is not the largest woman, but she knew how to get the most out of what she had. Gail Kim is on the receiving end in this 2003 bout. Might we see them battle again in the future? Trish doesn't rule out the possibility.



It was a proud moment for Stratus to be holding the championship belt for first time, on November 18, 2001. But now the challengers would be lining up, each of whom had elevated their games for this new era of women's wrestling.



thing that would be a trademark outfit, something you could dress up like at Halloween, like The Undertaker. Cowboy hats were all the rage at the time and the long jackets helped establish the look, too. And luckily, because I had somewhat of a following from the fitness stuff, I was able to debut using my own name, a rare thing in the industry.

Q: Along those same lines, you hadn't paid your "dues" by having a wrestler as a husband or boyfriend. It was fairly unusual for a female to walk into the wrestling business through the front door, as you did. Did you have to fight for respect?

A: Believe me, I even had to fight for respect even on my own team. Test was really adamant on making me earn his respect. He didn't want to give me too much credit and made sure I knew it when I made a mistake. Albert would tell me not to worry and that I was a fine. It was a good mix. Test would say I sucked, and that I'd have to improve.

Q: Test certainly didn't take it easy on his fellow Canadian. Of course, he passed away last year. What kind of person was he once you got to know him?

A: At first, I thought this guy was giving me a hard time. I later told Test he was pretty mean to me, but that it made me improve and work harder to try to earn his respect.

Q: But Albert was a cuddly, friendly, furry kind of guy?

A: Furry, yes. I don't know about cuddly, I never actually cuddled with him [laughs], but he's a teddy bear and super smart. He was great to work with. He was very encouraging and made sure I was being utilized in matches. He would analyze things after the matches. Being a valet at ringside was one of the most important learning aspects of my career. Before you get into the game, you have to understand what the game is truly about.

One of the first people who it meant a lot to me to earn their respect was Bubba Ray Dudley. After he put me through a table at Backlash, he kind of gave me the "you're okay, kid." He says it was because I told him I



When Stratus discovered that she and Lita were the objects of a wager between Chris Jericho and Christian as to who would sleep with their respective woman first, Trish flew into a rage (above) and had to be physically restrained by Y2K (right).

actually wanted to take the table and to not protect me with his legs.

Q: That's quite a coup, considering he isn't known as someone who passes out compliments easily.

A: Buh Buh and I remain close to this day. He's been a good friend throughout and a good friend for advice. He's the kind of guy that if he respects you, he'll support you, and if he doesn't, well, he'll let you know!

Q: Did you undergo wrestling training while a valet?

A: There was no real training for the women's division. I was on the road four days a week, and then three days at home. I kept up the formal training with Ron for a few months and basically just learned as I went. My first match was T&A and me against The Hardy Boyz and Lita. They protected me and let me do a lot of running around. I'd been a jock my whole life, so I managed to pull it off. I guess everyone realized I was a team player when I would take a chokeslam from Kane, I was cool with getting the stinkface, and I didn't mind getting tossed over the top rope by The Big Show.

That's when Fit [Finlay] and I started working together. That led to the turning point for my career, the Vince McMahon storyline, leading to me slapping him at WrestleMania.

Q: I didn't like that angle, but I suppose that was the intent.



"I had to have surgery. It was the worst thing that could happen. But that allowed me to sit back and study matches. I watched a lot of The Rock's stuff, and thought, *There are no girls doing what he's doing—why not, maybe I could be the female version of The Rock.*"

tion. He had you crawl around on all fours and speak "Doggesee" at one point. What was your mindset during that incident? Did you check your ego at the door for the sake of entertaining the fans, or did you want to prove you weren't above certain things?

A: I think that was an enormously strong turning point for my career. When I split from T&A and started working with Vince McMahon, I couldn't have asked for a better mentor to work with each week. He watched every promo I did and corrected me on the spot. He had a clear vision for how that storyline was going to start, evolve, and end, and I trusted him. People think I must have felt humiliated. Are you kidding? Look at the result. I was simply an actress doing a part that allowed me to show emotion—that's a good thing.

Q: And the fans certainly invested a lot of emotion into you.

A: Absolutely. It led to me turning on Vince McMahon at WrestleMania, and Stephanie McMahon and I having a high-profile match when both of our characters were relatively new. It allowed me to show vulnerability. I think it was a strong storyline to this day. Would I want to watch it on my retirement reel? No. Would I like to watch the slap? Yes.

Q: Didn't you suffer an injury early on when you first became a full-time wrestler?

A: You're exactly up to speed. I was doing plyometric training, jumping off different levels, and then I fell and broke my ankle. I was devastated. I remember talking to Steph, because I was excited about being in this angle with Jeff [Hardy] and starting to do more matches, but she said I had to take care of myself. I had to have surgery. It was the worst thing that could happen. But that allowed me to sit back and study matches. I watched a lot of The Rock's stuff, and thought, *There are no girls doing what he's doing—why not, maybe I could be the female version of The Rock.*

Q: That was a high aspiration, but you did a pretty good job.

A: I started training really hard with the intention of kicking ass in the ring. At the time, I hosted *Excess*, which helped me get really comfortable in front of the camera. Then I won the championship in 2001, only a few short months after the ankle injury. Chyna had been the champ and she had left when the contract expired and she took the belt home. I guess the women's division got released along with her, because the women wrestled but there was no championship at stake. Then there was the Six-Pack Challenge in North Carolina involving me, Jacquelyn, Ivory, Lita, Molly, and newcomer Jazz.



Q: That was at Survivor Series, right?

A: It was the first time I won the championship. I told Fit that I wanted to fight the way the guys fought in the ring. Before, the girls would do a hair beal, a hair pull, a couple of punches, and then roll over each other. Then Fit said, "Let's do a bodyslam there, and how about a punch there, and a chop there." Maybe some of the boys didn't like it, and I remember Jack Lanza and Tony Garea, who were at the house shows, were more comfortable with us girls doing the hair-bealing than the chopping. I respected them, so I attempted a fine-line balance. I wanted a new style of women's wrestling.

Q: You mentioned Fit Finlay. He's a rough and gruff guy, often called the "Belfast Bruiser." Does he have a sensitive side?

A: He was assigned the women's matches, almost as a rib. Fit says he saw the eye of the tiger in me, and he wanted me to have the psychology to back it up. We started working diligently—eventually we were like Siamese twins: He would talk and I would finish his sentences. There wasn't much creative stuff for women. But we had 10 minutes of the show, and that was all up to us. So we decided to have our stories told through our matches instead of relying on backstage promos that we didn't have anyway. One example was the Molly Holly ass storyline, remember?

Q: Yes, the junk in the trunk.

A: We integrated so many things in our matches that allowed us to tell the story we were trying to tell, like me mooning her or when she ended up choking me out with my own thong. That storytelling, plus working with Jacquelyn on the road, I got to learn from one of the toughest workers out there.

Q: She was the original Chyna, wrestling men because there weren't enough women.



Stratus derives a great deal of joy out of punishing Victoria and then celebrating a victory over the woman who upset her with some wild claim of being betrayed by Trish when they were both fitness models.

A: She wanted to prove how hard it was to be on the road. Every match, I apologized for sucking really bad, giving her bad bodyslams, and taking crappy clotheslines. Then Ivory helped me develop more in matches. But the turning point, as far as me looking better in the ring, was my series against Molly Holly. She was very experienced and was very generous, giving me moves to try. She helped me develop my character, my wrestling, my repertoire of moves. When we had matches on pay-per-view, we would wrestle for a couple of days beforehand. She and Fit were the keys to my success in the beginning.

Q: The proof was in the pudding. Now we look back upon that era as the golden age of Divas in WWE: you, Lita, Molly Holly, and the rest of them. I'm sure all of you look back with that attitude.

A: It was a combination of things. Molly and I went from doing three-minute matches to 10-minute matches on pay-per-

view. Then storylines were developed. Victoria debuted and had all that in-ring experience from Louisville, and I had the performance experience at that point. We created the crazy storyline of Victoria coming after me because of our fitness connection. We even had our own pay-per-view package, which women had never received before. We wrestled the first women's hardcore match and then had a Chicago Streetfight. How many chair shots had women taken? I know it was my only chair shot. The match started with the fans chanting "puppies" and then we did some crazy move and got "holy sh—" chants instead. We snuck up on everybody and made them realize women's wrestling was kind of awesome. Jazz debuted right after that. Jazz was the epitome of the "bitch is back" character and really created sympathy for my babyface character because she was beating my ass every week.

Q: Plus she came in with the ECW background, so she had a bad-ass attitude that people could believe.

A: All of these components were the keys to developing legitimately great matches. We knew we had something awesome going on. It was a great time for us.

Q: You explained that in a way that makes that whole period understandable. I remember so many times the women's division would have one big star such as Wendi Richter or Alundra Blayze, and I thought it was going somewhere, but it really went nowhere. You made it succeed by forcing the evolution along.

A: We didn't always get a storyline on a platter. They didn't sit down and tell us what we should do in the ring. They did that with Brock [Lesnar] by giving him the F5, and telling him that was an awesome move that only he would do. That rarely happens. It's your responsibility sometimes. Victoria and I got all those fitness pictures together for the pre-tape that led to our hardcore match, for example. Today, I see the girls doing each other's moves. They should go to the videogame and play the character! Everyone has their own signature moves! It's important to go out there and own those moves and maintain the integrity of those moves.

Q: That's an excellent idea right there. It goes back to old school. Everybody knew Nick Bockwinkel couldn't take a punch. Not only did fans know what moves the wrestlers could do, but they knew the moves they couldn't take.

A: I see tilt-a-whirls done by every girl on the roster. But back in the golden era, only Lita did that. Could we all do it? Maybe. But I'm not going to do it because my character wouldn't do that move. It's Wrestling 101. That's what is missing in the girls' matches today. These are your moves, do them in the right order, and the crowd will know how to react. It's very simple, kids.

Q: To me, they all seem like The Great Muta, bouncing around off the ropes.

A: They're not very protective. Everyone wants to do the coolest thing out there. There are only a few real free-for-alls: punches, slaps, kicks, bodyslams, and suplexes. Everything else helps to develop an identity. I'm telling you this, but you

"Today, I see the girls doing each other's moves. They should go to the videogame and play the character! Everyone has their own signature moves!"

already know it. But that's what is missing right now.

Q: You mentioned the chair shot. What was the stiffest shot you ever took in the ring?

A: I got a couple of stiffies from Victoria.

Q: Didn't she break Beth Phoenix' jaw and the noses of Michelle McCool and Candice Michelle?

A: She sure did. I busted my lip with her. I broke my nose three times, one with Jacquelyn and one with Victoria. I got a few black eyes with her, too. Do you mean the most "oops" type shot?

Q: Yeah, what was the most brutal?

A: It was a house show in Hawaii. I took a hit from Victoria and bumped so hard on the ground that my leg came back and hit my face. My shin hit my lip, which went into my tooth. It was a giant, split gash. I was a heel at the time, back when I was doing the bowing in the ring. I did this bow and a faucet of blood came out when I flipped my hair back and the crowd went nuts. The ref wanted to wrap it up, but I was good with it because the crowd was going mental. We had an awesome match. This was as the Diva Search was happening, so it was



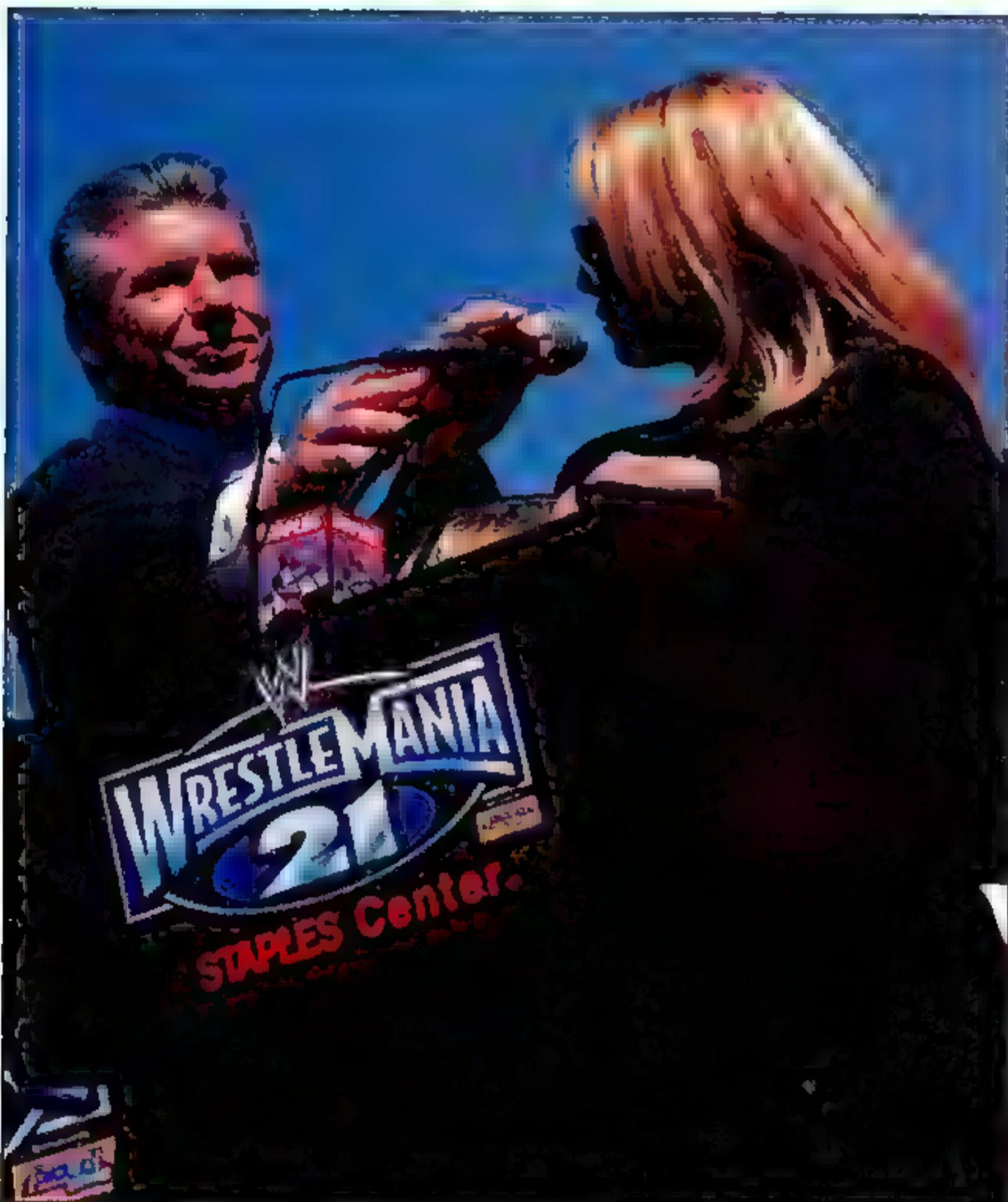
good for those girls to see live what can happen out there. I got stitches from the doctor on site. We flew to Japan that night and when we landed my lip had swollen almost ten-fold. It was my ugliest, most intense, and energizing moment.

Q: What would you say was your favorite WrestleMania?

A: Each one holds a special place for me. My most intense match was against Mickie in 2006 (WrestleMania 22), just before I retired. I'd never heard a women's match get as crazy a reaction as we did that night in Chicago. I was the babyface, but the fans were booing me, like Rock-Hogan a few years earlier. Could have been they liked Mickie more because of the lesbian-esque overtones of the storyline. Also, turning on Chris Jericho at Madison Square Garden, having a powerful heel-turning moment on the biggest stage of them all, was my favorite time in wrestling. To have an eight-month storyline and move into a high-profile match at WrestleMania XX was amazing. Then WrestleMania X8 in Toronto was really awesome because I competed for the Women's championship. I had debuted in the ring just a year before, so who thought I'd be wrestling for the Women's championship in my hometown of Toronto. I didn't win the belt, but just being in that match was special. Rock and Hogan were in the previous match, and for them to say, "Go get it, kid. Good luck, this is your hometown, have a good match" was incredible.

Q: You were heavily involved in the previous generation of Divas, and then you were still around for the newer stars such as Mickie James and Melina. Who were some of the younger women you thought had a lot of promise?

A: I think Mickie was a tweener between eras, on the cusp of working with us oldies and obviously at the forefront of the current women. It was neat to see this girl with great experience have a chance at the big time. Melina reminded me of myself because she started as a valet, which gave her time to



McMahon wasn't asking Trish to bark like a dog when turning the microphone over to her at a press conference prior to WrestleMania 21. He wanted her to hawk her match against Christy Hemme, the former Diva Search winner who was being trained by Lita.

"When I saw Melina debut with M-N-M, I remember thinking that was the new T&A. But she was so much sexier than me, when she came in with that split! I was like, 'Damn, that is hot!'"

bump. We did this in our pay-per-view match at Backlash, but in the middle of the fall I saw that the ringsteps were below me. I put out my arm down on the apron to avoid the steps, but my body twisted over and my arm popped out, causing an anterior dislocation. If you watch the match, you can tell the sound that came out of me is real pain. We ended the match in a disqualification and I could barely move my arm. But I was still trash-talking as she headed back up the ramp. But the minute we went dark, I said, "This hurts a lot!" Once I got to the back they went to pop it back in and Fit offered to hold my hand. I said I didn't need to hold a hand—let's just do this! Mostly because that's the answer he'd want to hear.

Q: If you were going to hurt yourself, at least you did it on pay-per-view instead of the obscurity of a house show in Hawaii.

A: I was very lucky that I didn't have to go away to heal. That's when Beth was brought in, initially to be my muscle as Mickie and I tried to resolve our storyline. Then Beth got injured and that was spoiled. If you look at my matches from the time, I couldn't do the Ma-Trish as



much because I couldn't rotate my shoulder and had a fracture in my arm as well. I went right into yoga class and healed it myself. Right up until the very end, I was suffering from so much pain. It was a vicious circle. It was getting really bad after the Mickie storyline and into the storyline leading to my retirement. My never-healing arm was another reason my body wanted retirement. It finally healed, though.



Photo by Rothko/AVION

Now that she was out of the wrestling game, safe and sound, Stratus settled in to a new, laid-back lifestyle. Hardly! Her new action-documentary TV series, *Stratosphere*, saw her bungee jumping in Indonesia (below), Kalarippayatt swordfighting in India, (bottom), and Vo Binh Dinh wrestling in Vietnam (opposite page bottom).



Q: In a "Q&A" interview I did with Lisa Marie last year, she told me a wild story—an action-adventure, really—about how you, she, and Christy Hemme were involved in a car accident. She said your car slid into a diesel truck, was sent spinning, and the back window exploded on Christy. Does that bring back memories?

A: It was really scary. I've often thought of how much I'd been on the road and never had any tickets or accidents—except this one. We were going to State College, Pennsylvania, driving through the mountains when this huge, crazy storm hit. We

were driving really slow, singing *Chicago*, the musical, the whole way. I was driving ...

Q: I have to stop you right there. Lisa Marie's version is completely different. She said you were listening to Kid Rock!

A: Really? Well, there was this duet that was our favorite to sing. She was Kid Rock and I was Sheryl Crow. But that wasn't any fun for Christy, so we inputted *Chicago* and we enjoyed that together. I remember seeing the truck headlights getting closer and closer in the rear-view mirror, coming really fast, and trying to go around



"When WWE aired a package talking about how WrestleMania was the place where legends were made, and it mentioned Hulk Hogan, The Rock, Steve Austin, and Trish Stratus, it was shocking to me. Whether that's accurate or just WWE marketing, it's pretty awesome."

us. As we moved over, there must have been a draft that pulled the back end of our car, so our car hit one of the truck's tires and spun out like crazy. I was like the mother hen telling the girls everything would be okay, then moments later I cried "Holy sh—" because we almost died. The other driver kept going and the Hertz rent-a-car was written off. That was our craziest near-death accident experience.

Q: Earlier, we were talking about the "Doggese" episode and some of the humiliation employed in wrestling, but you can also go out in glory. Your sendoff was probably better than Ric Flair's because at least you won. How could you ask for anything more?

A: That was a storybook ending, for sure, especially to have it against Lita, who, by the way, in talking about all the girls I worked with, I have yet to really mention her. Unfortunately, she had that neck injury and missed out on some of those formative years of the women's division. But it was extra special sharing that moment with her, someone who I had come



in with and with whom I had developed a friendship over the years. To this day she remains one of my closest friends from the business. At the risk of sounding boastful, dare I say that I think Lita and I had that Rock-Austin appeal? I felt my match against Lita was the culmination of a career-long rivalry. You know, I was shocked that so many people initially questioned my use of the sharpshooter to end the match. Tell me how perfect that was!



Photo Courtesy of Stratosphere



Trish took up yoga to relieve severe back pain and got so engrossed in the discipline that she opened her own studio, *Stratusphere*, in Vaughan, Ontario. What form! How Strat-uesque!

Q: Yes, it was perfect. It added that extra layer.

A: Bret Hart even got in touch with me afterward and said it was really awesome. Just to have that comment was pretty cool.

Q: Try to put aside your modesty for a moment. You're a seven-time Women's champion. You're probably the most significant female wrestler since The Fabulous Moolah. Have you thought about your accomplishments and your place in wrestling history?

A: Little things remind me that I may have left an impact. When WWE aired a package talking about how WrestleMania was the place where legends were made, and it showed Hulk Hogan, The Rock, Steve Austin, and Trish Stratus, it was shocking to me. Whether that's accurate or just WWE marketing, it's pretty awesome. It's not until I do an interview like this or see a YouTube tribute video that I see my career in proper perspective. I really attribute a lot of my success in fitness modeling and wrestling to the timing of my career. I just tried to make sure that I was prepared for all the opportunities that came my way.

Q: You went back to *Raw* as a guest host in late-2009. You're still young. Is there any chance you'd return to WWE to make a serious impact again?

A: I always want to do something that is challenging and impactful, no matter what I do. I'd have to work with someone that I haven't worked with before, or against someone I didn't realize my full potential against. The two people on the list would be Beth Phoenix and Nattie Neidhart. I'm dying for Nattie to peak

and finally come out. Absolutely, I'd go back—but only if I could do something that makes a difference.

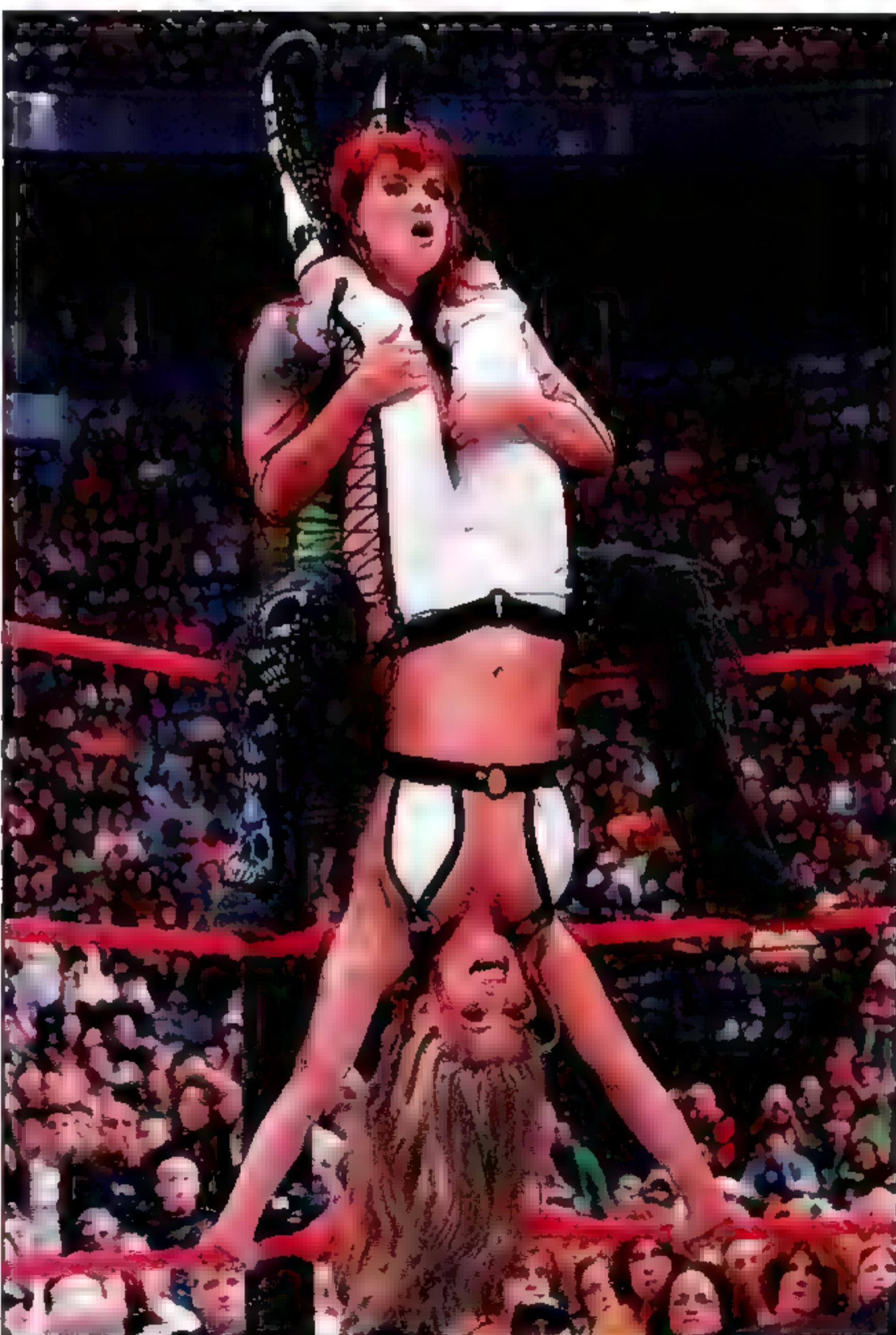
Q: Maybe a genuine Act II, like Shawn Michaels had?

A: Possibly. If I could go back with impact, I would definitely consider it.

Q: Do you have any regrets while you were with WWE?

A: My only regret was during my last *Raw* in Madison Square Garden. I was given a great opportunity to say a few words on the mike and I guess it was like when you watch award shows and they forget who to thank—well, I did the same. I had been going over some names in my head all day and I didn't really want to plan anything, but sure enough, everything at the end was so surreal and emotional, and it was hard to think of where to cut off the list, so I just kept it short and sweet by thanking everyone for coming on this amazing ride.

So if I may use this moment to thank a few people, I would include the McMahons for giving me the support and the opportunity to enjoy almost seven years in the ring in front of millions of people all over the world. Actually I guess if I'm going to thank anyone for the opportunity, I should first go through the folks who gave me the opportunity before Vince even knew who he was going to sign. That includes Michael Hayes, Carl DeMarco, Jim Ross, and, to a certain degree, Terry



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A title victory over Lita in her retirement match spoke volumes about how WWE feels about Stratus. If she does come back, it's an almost certainty that it will be for the McMahons.

"I always want to do something that is challenging and impactful, no matter what I do ... Absolutely, I'd go back—but only if I could do something that makes a difference."

Taylor, as he was the one who left my file open on J.R.'s desk. Michael was the one who when I met him first encouraged me to send something to the company, and once I was hired he continued to be in my ear, giving me the heads-up on what was what.

From the beginning, Carl DeMarco was straight up with me about what to expect. We did some amazing things with the WWE brand up here in Canada, always working to knock down a preconceived notion of what a "wrestler" was. Getting on the cover of Canada's number-one fashion magazine and hosting Canada's Walk of Fame were just a few of the kinds of things we accomplished together. We continue to be close friends today.

A huge thank you to Fit—there truly never would have been a women's division like there was without him. He saw something in me and dragged it out of me, and he believed in me and encouraged me to go out there and "fight like one of the boys."

A thank-you to The Rock for epitomizing the words "sports entertainer" and letting me know I could be the female version of him if that's what I wanted: Being both an entertaining wrestler and a performer is what I always strived to do while I was in the ring.

A few honourable mentions go to Bubba, Johnny Ace, Jan, who was more than just a makeup artist to some of us girls, the seamstresses, Terry and Julie, Kasama ("Clear!"), all the peeps in the truck, including Kevin Dunn, who always dished it straight up and gave me great advice, the folks at www.wwe.com and *WWE Magazine* (that includes Shane O' Mac, who ran the mag at the time and allowed me the creativity in my shoots and to share my ideas), the referees—believe it or not, I probably spent more time and had more inside jokes with these guys than some of the girls (Korderas, Chad, Chioda, and Jack), Team Merch, and, of course, last but not least, all the women of the WWE, including Stephanie, who was first a friend then a boss to me.

Q: How did it feel to be named *Pro Wrestling Illustrated's* Woman of the Decade?

A: First of all, to be named Woman of the Year four times by you guys was an honor. I didn't even know they were having decade awards until I picked up the issue where Hunter was named Wrestler of the Decade. I flipped through the magazine and there it was: Woman of the Decade! When you consider how many other women had to be considered, it's just an amazing feeling to be recognized. It really meant a lot to me.

Q: One final question: Who has more fun, blondes or brunettes?



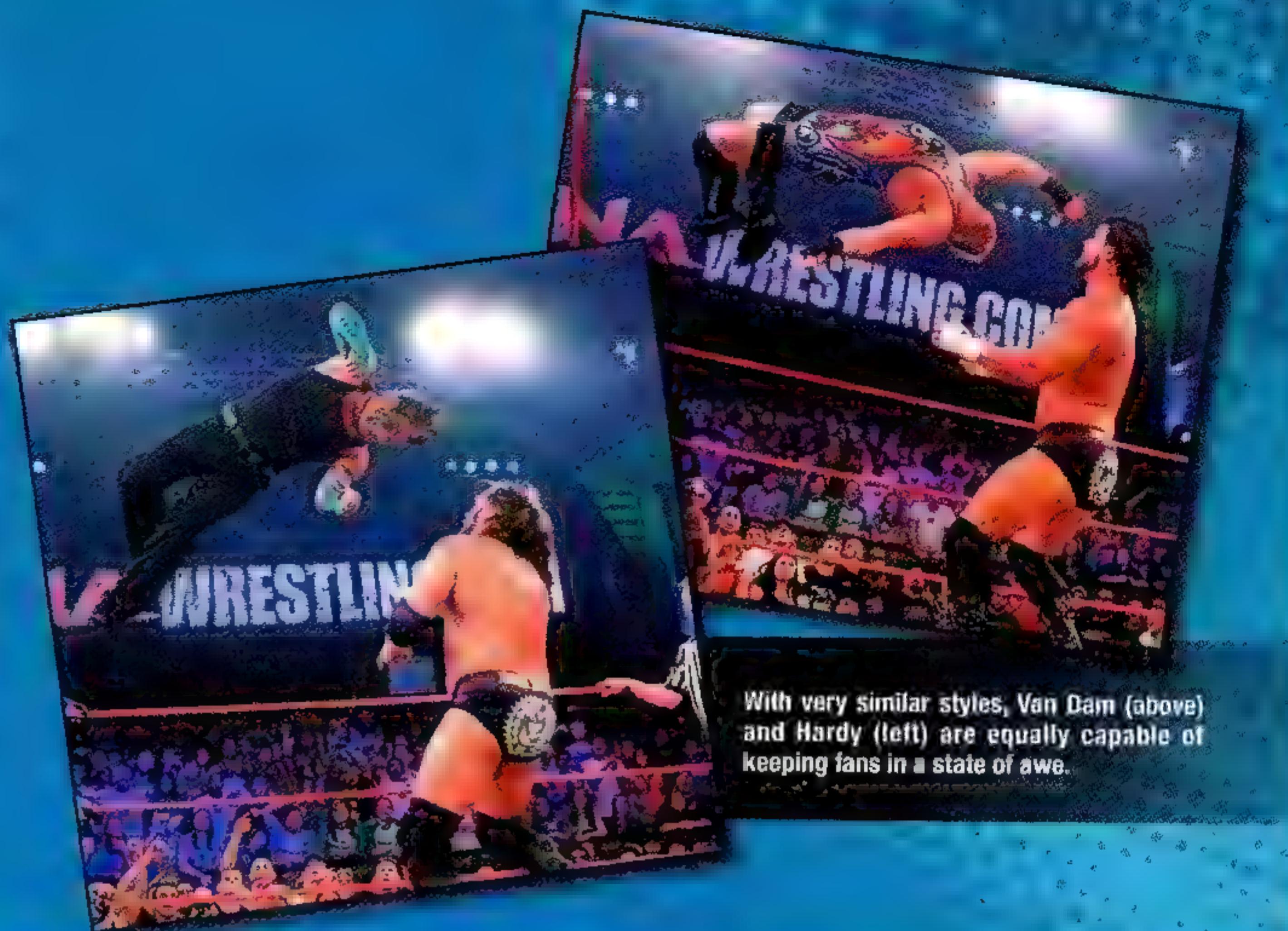
A: Brunette is my natural color, so I've gone back to my roots. I may have to say blondes have more fun because I had my fitness career, wrestling career, and movie career as a blonde. And, as a brunette, I'm a yogi. But I have fun no matter what color my hair is! □



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Back to her roots, so to say, Stratus returned to *Raw* last September as a blonde in the role of guest hostess. Of course, she also got in on the action, sparking rumors that she is contemplating a comeback. If there isn't a *Bail Enforcers II*, that may just happen!





With very similar styles, Van Dam (above) and Hardy (left) are equally capable of keeping fans in a state of awe.

COULD IT LEAD TO A SUPERFEUD?

A HARDY-RVD SHOWDOWN IS INEVITABLE

JEFF HARDY AND ROB VAN DAM HAVE BECOME CLOSE FRIENDS IN TNA, BUT NOW THAT RVD IS THE TNA WORLD CHAMP, THINGS WON'T REMAIN FRIENDLY FOR MUCH LONGER

TEXT BY HARRY BURKETT

PHOTOS BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

HIS RIDICULOUS risk-taking and uncanny athleticism easily wins over fans, and his unpretentious backstage demeanor makes everyone watching WWE TV think that he's just a normal guy with extraordinary talent and an extraordinary job.

Here's a pop quiz for you. Does the previous statement refer to Jeff Hardy ... or Rob Van Dam?

Bzzzz. Time's up. Actually, that statement refers to Rob Van Dam. That was our take on RVD after he was named the number-one wrestler in the 2002 "PWI 500."



Rob Van Dam delivers a stiff boot to Robert Roode's face. Van Dam's martial arts skills and quick footwork are what separate him from Jeff Hardy in the ring.

But those words could just as easily describe Jeff Hardy. While Van Dam matured into a singles wrestler a bit sooner (Hardy ranked number 32 in the 2002 "500"), their career paths have been remarkably similar.

Now Hardy and Van Dam, two of the most talented and charismatic—and, yes, frustrating—stars in the history of pro wrestling, have arrived in TNA at roughly the same time. In fact, according to Van Dam, it was Hardy who gave him a call urging him to sign with the company.

These free spirits have become kindred souls. Hardy and Van Dam displayed some beautiful teamwork and a harmonious coexistence when they recently defeated Beer Money Inc. on *Impact!* Sure, their daredevil styles complement each other, but it's probably their parallel backstories that make them such an intriguing duo.

Both wrestlers paid their dues on the independent circuit for several years. Hardy in North Carolina and Van Dam in Michigan and Japan, because their in-ring styles were considered too radical for the WWF and WCW at the time. Van Dam found his niche in the original ECW and Hardy gained success with brother Matt in WWE's tag team ranks.

Continuous—indeed, relentless—grassroots fan support forced WWE brass to take them seriously. They both finally received healthy pushes

as singles wrestlers in WWE back in 2001 and '02.

Yet fans were confused. Van Dam and Hardy were exciting and charismatic, but they weren't being pushed beyond the Intercontinental title level. Triple-H ended up defeating Hardy for the I-C belt in 2001, and then-World heavyweight champion Triple-H dashed Van Dam's main-event hopes by beating him at No Mercy 2002.

Triple-H—the ultimate insider—was blamed for holding down their careers. The truth was Vince McMahon didn't trust them, and, when he finally gave them main-event pushes as world champions, they quickly fizzled due to out-of-the-ring controversies.

Could Van Dam have asked for a bigger push than the one he received in the summer of 2006, when he enjoyed a dual run as WWE and ECW champion? Yet that amazing run quickly went up in smoke when he and Sabu were arrested on marijuana charges in Ohio.

Sound familiar? Hardy's personal issues were so well known that WWE incorporated them into the storyline that culminated with the "Charismatic Enigma" capturing the WWE title in late-2008 and having two more brief runs with the World title in the summer of 2009. Then, only days after Hardy left WWE, police raided his home and found numerous drugs and prescription pills.

Hardy and Van Dam are not company men. They are free spirits who live a bit too freely for some folks' tastes. RVD weighed in on the comparisons with Hardy during a recent interview with *fanhouse.com*: "We both have similar visions of what a good match is and we also have similar likes and dislikes about the job. When it comes right down to it and when it comes time to do promos and people are giving us words to talk about, we're both rolling our eyes like, *Oh, man, can't we just get out in the ring and show off?* Because that's what we really like to do and that's when we're shining... We also



RVD's hardcore ECW wars have taken a toll on his body. Hardy seems the fresher of the two wrestlers. TNA fans around the world are no doubt salivating over the prospect of this potential superfeud.

both feel like we rose to the top of the business against the odds, against the preconceived notions of the promoter that actually did try to hold us down. We did it through connecting with our fans in such a way that the fans brought us to the top."

Their likeability, stand-up attitudes, and mutual interests have made them allies in TNA. But how long can this last? With RVD besting Hardy in a number-one contenders match, and subsequently defeating A.J. Styles for the TNA World title in April, he seized the lead in their race to the top of TNA, and it's unlikely Hardy will subvert his own aspirations just because he and Van Dam have a few things in common. Friends or not, there can only be one man atop TNA and Hardy is unlikely to cede that position to RVD without a struggle.

However, Van Dam seems primed for this showdown. His assessment of the situation suggests that despite befriending Hardy, he's been

anticipating this feud all along. "I thought more about the fact that Jeff and I wrestling each other would be a hell of a match and a great draw that you couldn't see anywhere else. I expect that to eventually be something that TNA will utilize and the fans will go out of their way to see ... [Jeff] was saying we could have great matches and [TNA] would be such a better place than the other company. It was cool of him to call and say that. We're both looking forward to someday owning that main-event spot with just the two of us."

Indeed, Hardy is especially motivated. While Van Dam genuinely seemed to join TNA for the fun and competition, Hardy actually has more to prove in a rivalry with Van Dam. After all, Van Dam dominated his feud with Hardy back in 2001-02.

Consider these stats: Van Dam defeated Hardy in his WWF debut way back in 1997. He also beat Hardy for the hardcore title in his WWF return at

2001's Invasion pay-per-view. Hardy regained the hardcore belt on Raw, but Van Dam won it back in a high-profile ladder match at SummerSlam 2001. Van Dam defeated Hardy to win the Intercontinental and European titles in July 2002. He beat Hardy to earn an Intercontinental title shot at SummerSlam 2002. Hardy became so frustrated when Van Dam beat him again in January 2003 that he actually attacked RVD after the match and turned heel. Then on the episode of *Impact* in which RVD won the TNA World title, he had to go through Hardy first in a number-one contenders match before he could get his shot.

Van Dam stands at 6-1 in high-stakes matches against Hardy. Regardless of his intentions when he called RVD, Hardy must now be burning to unseat his friend as champion, or at least level the score a bit. Either way, the daredevil superfeud is going to happen in TNA. Both men are counting on it.



Though they once stood side by side in TNA, RVD's ascension to the World title must stick in Hardy's craw. After all, Jeff played a role in bringing RVD to TNA in the first place!



TRIPLE H WITHOUT HBK: THE GAME'S ABOUT TO CHANGE

When Shawn Michaels announced his retirement on Raw in late-March, WWE fans weren't the only ones sorry to see him go. Triple-H, Michaels' close friend and tag team partner, knew he was in for a big change with HBK no longer riding shotgun

BY LOUIE DEE

HOW WOULD YOU feel if one day, a trusted co-worker and good friend failed at a specific task and was banished from the workplace forever? Chances are you'd feel a lot like Triple-H did immediately following WrestleMania 26. Shawn Michaels' career was ended by his loss to The Undertaker, but he is home in San Antonio enjoying his family. Triple-H is on the road most of the time, away from Stephanie and his two daughters, and now no longer enjoying the companionship of his best friend.



Photo by Stu Saks



Photo by Stu Saks

"He's happy about a quarter of the time, and he's miserable the rest of the time," said a wrestler who requested to remain nameless, presumably out of fear for sledgehammers.

In his dual role as main-event level wrestler and son-in-law of Vince McMahon, Triple-H is under an enormous amount of pressure. The recent incarnation of D-X represented much more than one might think. Sure, it was pure fun for Triple-H to revisit the sophomoric antics he and Michaels so often engaged in through the years. But the laughs were only one advantage to having Michaels around.

More significantly, Michaels filled a "brother-of-the-road" role for Triple-H. Any wrestler with a family at home knows how lonely the road can be. By being a friend, confidante—by just being there—Michaels made the road more bearable for Triple-H. But now he's gone. The ever-present best friend Triple-H had relied on for so long is no longer around to serve as a sounding board, a mentor, a sidekick.

Being in such a fragile place is bad enough for "The Game," but it might end up being much, much worse for the rest of the WWE locker room. That's because Triple-H is like a wounded animal right now. And like any wounded animal, he's apt to strike out viciously in any direction, doing whatever he believes will bring him comfort—whether that means taking a sledgehammer to current champs John Cena and Jack Swagger, or making examples out of the young, inexperienced

competitors on *NXT*. Triple-H could even slip back into the mold that made him our readers' choice for *Pro Wrestling Illustrated's* Most Hated Wrestler of the

Year in 2003, 2004, and 2005.

Whether within the ring or in life, it was always comforting to both Triple-H and Shawn Michaels to know that one would always be there for the other with an outstretched arm. Triple-H is sorely missing that right now.

"Shawn kind of balanced Hunter out," explained WWE heavyweight champion John Cena, who frequently teamed with D-X for six-man matches. "Triple-H is a high-strung dude, and Shawn kept him in check. But without Shawn, there's no telling what Triple-H will do. I guess we'll have to wait and see."

Unlike Cena, some WWE wrestlers are not willing to wait and see. In fact, some sense a chink in Triple-H's armor and can't wait to exploit it. Sheamus, for example, attempted to avenge his WrestleMania 26 loss to Helmsley by attacking him from behind with a pipe on *Raw* one night later.



Photo by George Napolitano

When Triple-H is in a foul mood, no one is safe. Poor Jim Ross found that out in 2008 with this ugly display that took fans a long time to forgive. The only saving grace for J.R. was that HHH beat him down with his fists, not his sledgehammer!



When Triple-H spoke, Michaels was always there to listen. As teammates, they amused each other, but more importantly, as friends, they trusted and confided in one another. For Triple-H, life on the road can never again be as it was.

"To hell with this fair fighting crap," Sheamus said. "You got to get the jump on guys like Triple-H. And it makes sense to do it while he's distracted by Michaels' retirement."

Triple-H's disproportionate retaliation against Sheamus a week later, which saw him attempt to work the Irishman over with his trusty sledgehammer, has some in WWE concerned that Helmsley's attack is the first sign of more violent outbursts to come.

The fears are well founded. Triple-H is an exceedingly frustrated man right now, and not only because his best friend has fled the scene. Triple-H also lost an excellent tag team partner in Michaels. Michaels' role in Triple-H's success should not be underestimated. After all, Michaels ended a brief sabbatical to help Triple-H indulge his competitive streak by taking on and defeating Unified tag team champs Chris Jericho and The Big Show for the title. With more than a decade of friendship under their belts, who else

ME AND MY SHADOW

Losing a friend or partner affects each wrestler differently. Some wrestlers go on to bigger and better things. Others fade into oblivion. Here's how some of wrestling's biggest stars fared after their famous teammates split:

Tito Santana. In the late-1970s, Santana and Ivan Putski parlayed their friendship and popularity into a six-month WWF tag team championship reign. But after dropping the straps to The Wild Samoans, Putski's star dimmed as Santana's rose. In 1984, Santana became one of the WWF's most popular Intercontinental champions, while Putski drifted into indy obscurity.

Larry Hennig. "The Axe" and Harley Race won four AWA World tag team titles, but once they went their separate ways, it was "Handsome" Harley who garnered the lion's share of publicity for winning seven NWA World championships, a spate of regional singles and tag titles, and the 1986 WWF King of the Ring tournament, while Hennig became best known for being Curt Hennig's father.

Rick Steamboat. Jay Youngblood's untimely death on September 2, 1985,

ended their partnership. But the five-time former Mid-Atlantic tag team champion forged a Hall of Fame career, during which he became wildly popular on a national level and celebrated as one of the game's all-time greats.

Shawn Michaels. After garnering critical acclaim as a member of The Midnight Rockers with Marti Jannetty, HBK famously ditched him and skyrocketed to the top of the industry. The divergent directions of his and Jannetty's singles careers have become the standard by which tag team wrestlers measure their value to the team after they split.

The Miz. Though the WWE draft was most responsible for splitting the former Unified tag team champions apart, Miz put an exclamation point on things by attacking John Morrison on *Raw*. Most people expected Morrison to become the breakout star, but The Miz became a dual champion and the bigger name.

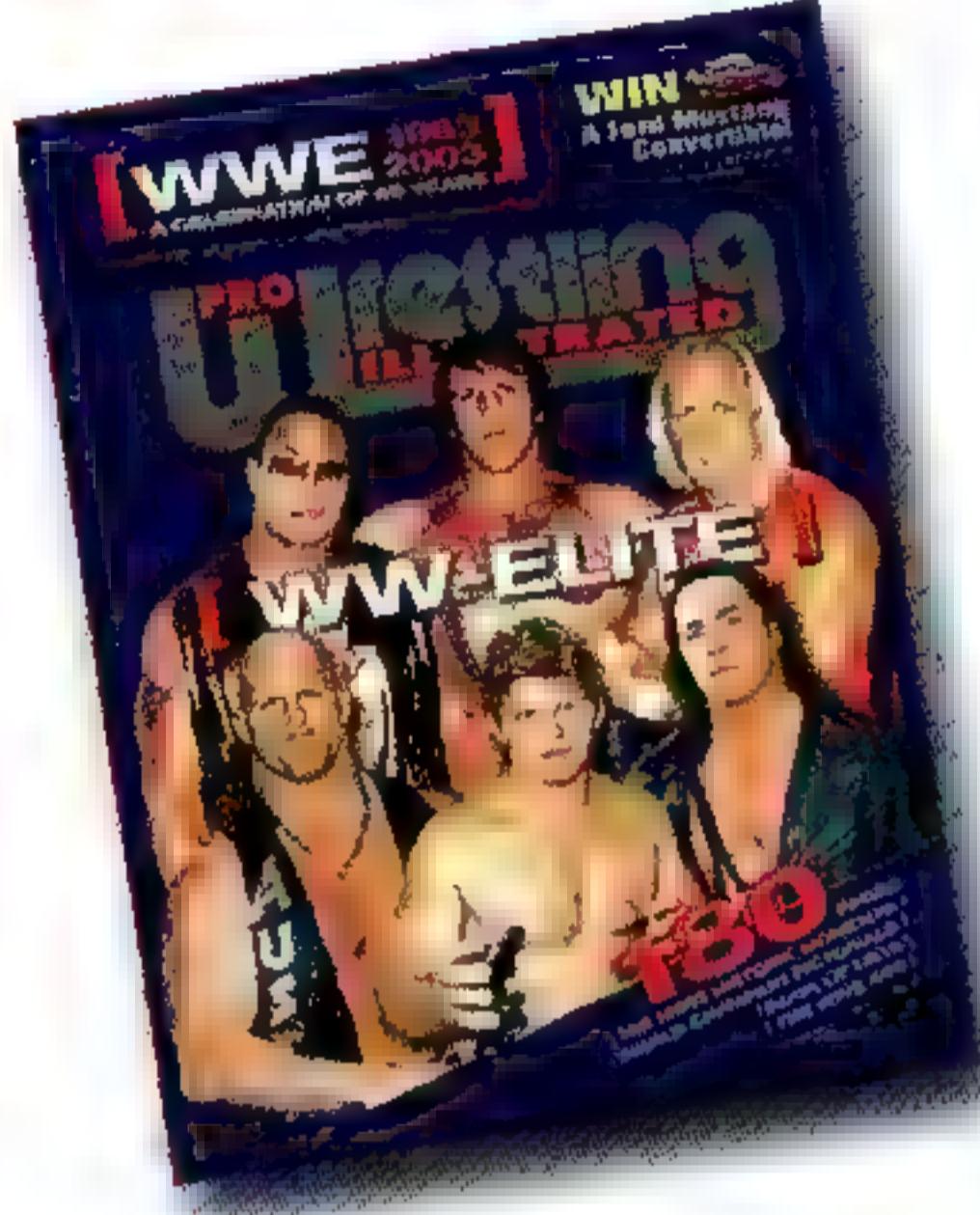
—Louie Dee



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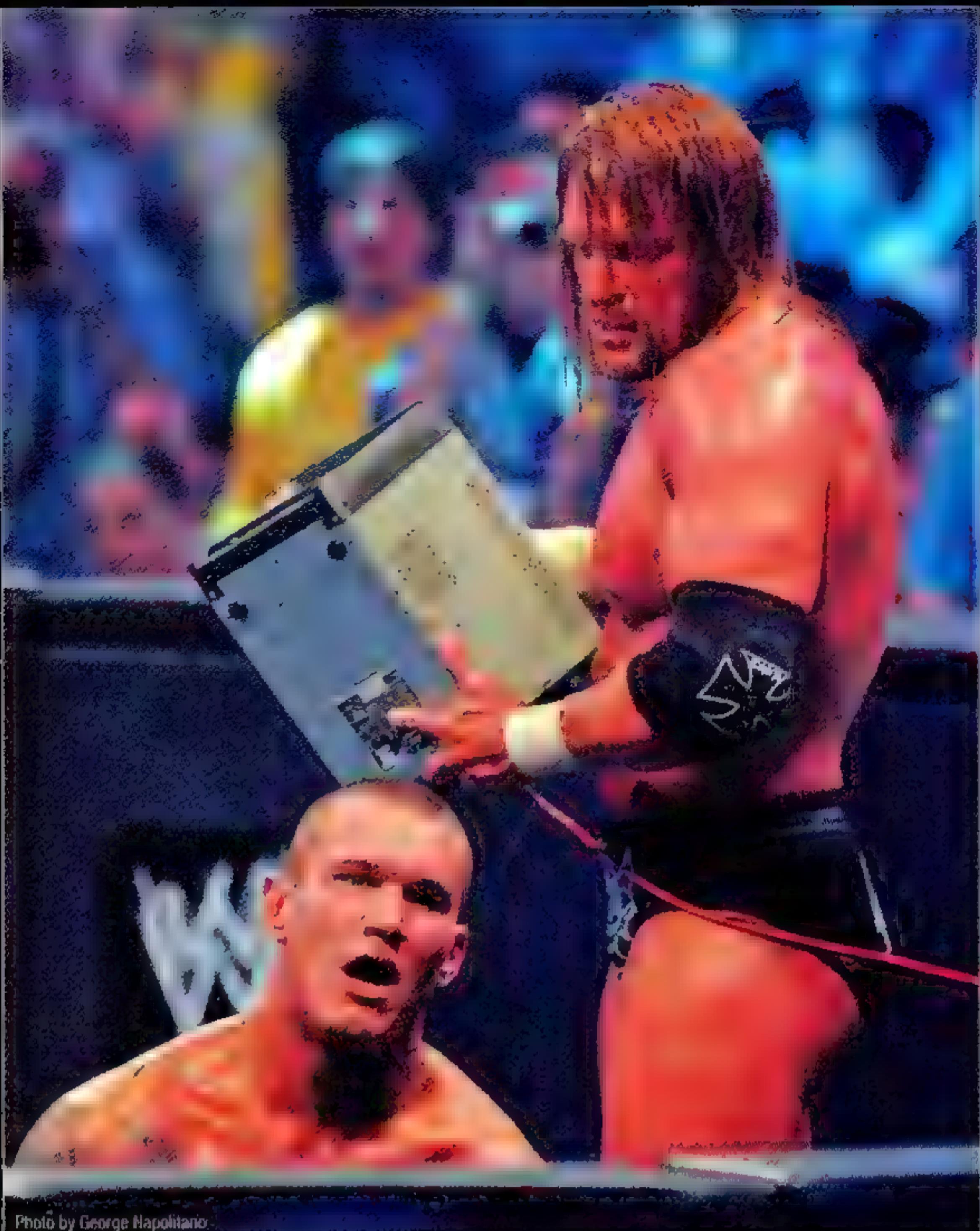


Photo by George Napolitano

Already stunned, Randy Orton is about to feel the impact of a television monitor across the back of his head. If this is the way it's going to be, Triple-H's co-wrestlers have to hope that he gets more closely involved with WWE's day-to-day operations and away from the action.

can step right in and work as seamlessly with Triple-H as Michaels did? Who can Helmsley trust enough to recruit as a tag team partner? Who truly has Triple-H's back? More importantly, how much can Triple-H even enjoy his job considering what he's lost by virtue of Michaels' retirement?

"Hunter and Shawn were having a blast, that's for sure," Cena continued. "But things suddenly aren't as much fun. Triple-H needs an outlet for his emotions and D-X gave him that. All that rage has to go somewhere."

Certainly, Cena and many of his WWE colleagues are hoping that rage doesn't end up being directed at them. Many are hoping Triple-H finds a more productive way to burn off his angst.

Some even think Triple-H may

rededicate himself to eclipsing Ric Flair's record of winning 16 world titles. "Triple-H is a pro," explained *Raw* commentator Michael Cole. "He's been in this business a long time and he knows how to ride out the ups and downs."

In theory, it makes sense for Triple-H to shed his association with Michaels and D-X and commit to climbing back into the WWE world title hunt, but what seems logical in theory may not necessarily comport with what's going on in "The Cerebral Assassin's" head these days.

"An angry Triple-H is second only maybe to an angry Vince McMahon," said the anonymous sledgehammer-fearing wrestler. "You don't want to be around either of them. And in Hunter's case, you certainly don't want to be facing him in the ring."



Photo by Joe Zanolle

HAS STRONG BEEN WRONG ALL ALONG? ALL ALONG?

**It's Time For
Him To Go
For It ... Alone!**

BY AL CASTLE

IT WAS ARGUABLY the biggest match of Roderick Strong's career—a shot at the Ring of Honor heavyweight championship in the main event of a live pay-per-view. And yet, Strong had a hard time getting excited about it.

That's because, as has been the case throughout much of his career, Strong found himself not as one-half of an epic showdown,

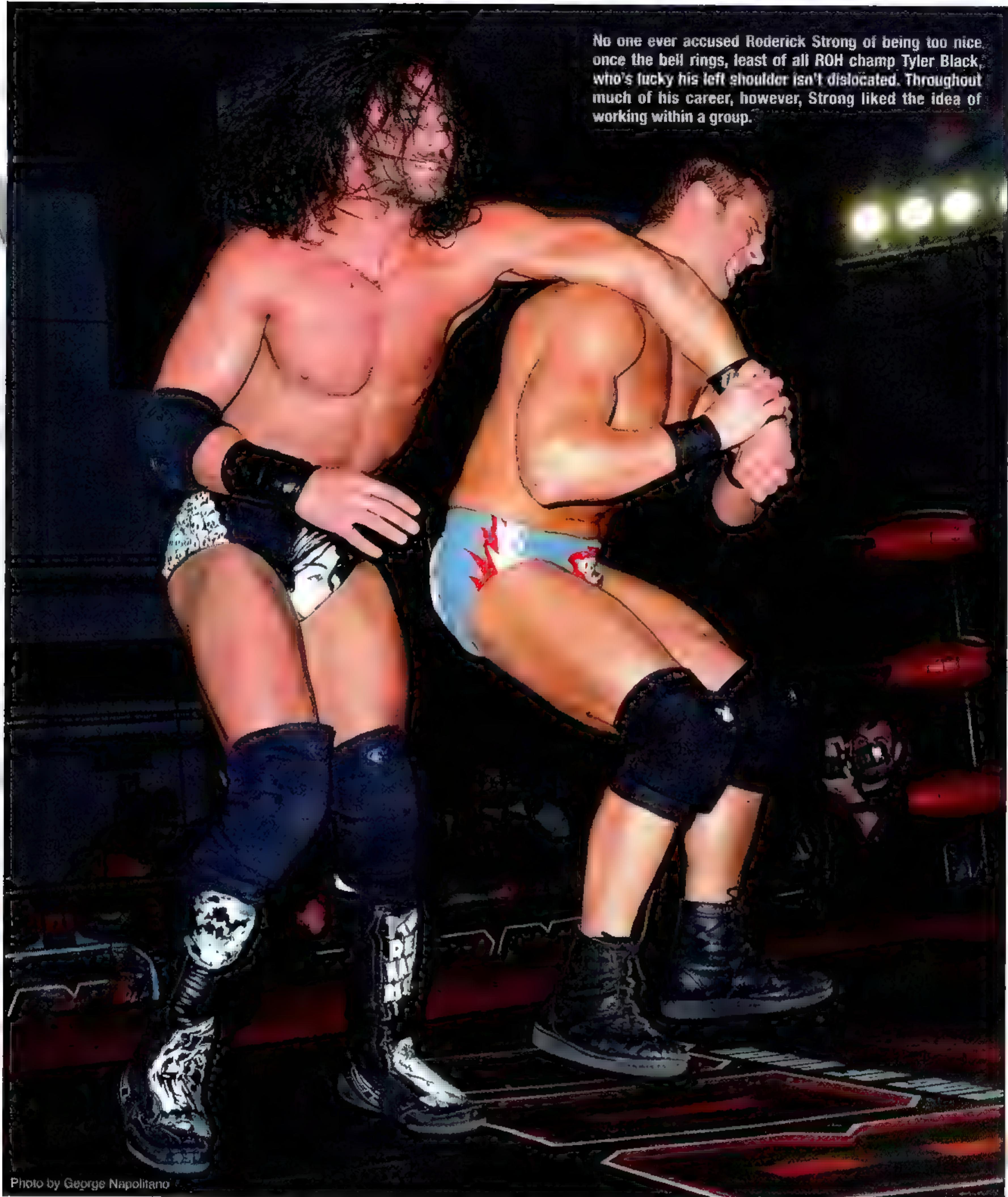


Photo by George Napolitano

but rather as a member of an ensemble cast. In this case, he was one-third of a triple-threat bout that included Austin Aries and ROH champ Tyler Black.

And, as he had done so many times before, Strong came up short in his bid to win the title.

"It's the story of my ROH career, right? Always the bridesmaid, never

the bride," Strong said in a phone interview days after the match at the Big Bang event in Charlotte, North Carolina. "It's tough to make it on your own when people always look at you as a member of a group. I guess I've got to stop looking at myself that way, too."

Whether it's been as a leader of a

No one ever accused Roderick Strong of being too nice, once the bell rings, least of all ROH champ Tyler Black, who's lucky his left shoulder isn't dislocated. Throughout much of his career, however, Strong liked the idea of working within a group.

stable of wrestlers, one-half of a tag team, or as the ally of another wrestler, Strong has largely played a supporting role during his seven years in Ring of Honor. And several of his colleagues say it's Strong's team spirit that has held him back from paving his own way.

"Roddy's been in this company

The right knee to the pit of an opponent's back makes the Strong Hold a particularly effective Boston crab. In this case, however, Austin Aries would free the champion before he would be forced to tap.



Photo by George Napolitano

longer than almost anyone, but he's yet to win a singles championship here," Black said. "We all know he's good enough. But he's just not used to having to go at it alone. Rather than just complain about it, he needs to show everyone that he is his own man."

Now 26 years old, Strong joined ROH in 2003, and within months formed a faction dubbed "Generation Next" that included other young lions such as Aries, Jack Evans, and future Motor City Machine Gun Alex Shelley. Over the next two years he found

success in the tag team division, partnering with Evans and later with Aries, with whom he held the ROH tag team championship for nine months.

After those teams dissolved, Strong again founded another stable of wrestlers in 2007—this one known as "The No Remorse Corps." In his NRC cohorts Rocky Romero and Davey Richards, Strong once again found the support and insulation that some say he has relied too heavily upon throughout his career.

"Rod may have been the leader of the group, but in some ways he

counted on me and Rocky more than we counted on him," Richards said of Strong. "Even if it was just to stand next to him during an interview, he needed to have somebody with him at all times."

After the NRC broke up in 2008, Strong created another team with Brent Albright. And while that team competed in mid-card bouts, several wrestlers with less tenure in ROH leapfrogged the New Orleans native within the heavyweight title picture.

Chief among them was Black, who joined ROH in 2007 and by 2009 had



Strong has a huge number of holds and moves as his disposal, and, as his name implies, he is very strong. Ranked number-61 in the 2009 "PW 500," the 26-year-old Floridian could well crack the top 10 with a victory over Black.

emerged as one of the top contenders to the heavyweight belt. When ROH Executive Producer Jim Cornette allowed Black to pick one of three ringside judges for a title match against then-champ Aries at February's Eighth Anniversary Show in New York City, who did Black come to? The perennial team player.

"Yeah, of course I chose Roddy, because of his history. He's all about looking out for other people's interests, and so I knew he would look out for mine," said Black, who went on to win the match and the title, with some assistance from Strong, who kept Aries' handpicked judge, Kenny King, from interfering.

A deal was made prior to the match that should Black win the title, Strong would get a title shot. But Cornette threw a monkey wrench into Strong's plans when he made the match a three-

STRONG COMPETITION

It may proceed as only a matter of time before Roddy Strong captures the heavyweight title, but there are a number of wrestlers threatening to surpass Strong who doesn't make his move quickly.

Davey Richards Six-time ROH World No Response Champion Richards is notoriously aggressive and very Machiavellian. He's also likely to be Strong's toughest with Black.

Christopher Daniels Major Fallen Angel Salvaged tank by making his debut in ROH in April after competing in ROH's No Mercy match. Daniels' Daniels' switch from ROH to ROH was determined to return to the spotlight of ROH.

Kevin Steen The solid pro wrestler M. Wrestling has always been a factor in this sport's career since debuting in 2000. Steen's return to ROH's spotlight in September last year, New York City, the guidance of former ROH World

champion Steve Corino, Steen has already established himself and is ahead Strong's clock.

Colt Cabana After a brief stint in WAVE, where he (and a younger) is Steve Corino's (and Cabana's) best friend, the 26-year-old Cabana is currently elevating himself to Black's standards.

Jay Briscoe The son of Hall of Famer Jim Briscoe, Jay Briscoe is currently the #1 singles star when he (and Matt, his brother) will be inducted into the ROH Hall of Fame next month. Strong, who is the son of Hall of Famer Jim Briscoe, is also a potential candidate.

Claudio Castagnoli The Swiss star was a consistent threat to Nigel McGuinness during his International Star reign and never allows himself to fall for the storylines of the ROH rankings.

Kenny King This Florida native has worked hard to prove himself in the sport, and after 10 years in the ring, he's in the running to be a

WWE's *Value* & *Majority* ready. Strong is 2002 States champion, while former ROH Entertainer Aries' King has made himself a factor since Black became the December 2008.

— Al Castle



Don't fall asleep on Cabana, Roddy!

The single-leg ("Sick Kick") dropkick allows Strong to pinpoint a precise target. At this point in his career, Roderick needs to be as precise in his pursuit of the ROH title.

way affair that also included Aries. Even Strong wondered if a career spent as a supporting star had come home to roost.

"Cornette could come up with whatever rationalization that he wanted to as to why he made the match a triple threat. But I think the truth is that he just couldn't imagine headlining a pay-per-view with me in a one-on-one match," Strong said.

But it's not as if Strong hasn't had plenty of one-on-one heavyweight title opportunities over the years. Nearly every ROH champion, from Bryan Danielson to Takeshi Morishima to Nigel McGuinness to Aries, has defended the title against Strong in singles contests. On his own in the ring during those matches, Strong has come up short every time.

And yet, Strong has remained a top contender for the heavyweight title throughout his ROH career—and a worthy one at that. Known as "the master of the backbreaker," Strong has made an art of punishing his opponents with an innovative offense that combines torturous submission holds, like the Boston crab, with high-impact moves, like his "Death By Roderick" fireman's carry into a double-knee gutbuster.

That arsenal has helped him win multiple singles titles in other independent promotions, including the heavyweight title in ROH's sister promotion, Full Impact Pro Wrestling, on two occasions.

But the big prize—the ROH heavyweight title—remains elusive. Whether it's match makers' unfair practices, his own insecurity, or just plain bad luck, one thing remains for certain: Until Strong starts looking out for himself—and only himself—he won't make it on his own.

There's no "I" in team, but there is one in "Roderick." □

Three-way matches are exciting for the fans, but often they take destiny out of the hands of the combatants. What's the use of executing the perfect finisher when a third party with a vested interest is just a few feet away?

Photo by George Napolitano



Photo by George Napolitano



[THE WRESTLING ANALYST]

JACK SWAGGER

Years Pro: 4

Size: 6'6", 263

"PWI 500" Listings: 2009—18

2008—222

Titles: FCW heavyweight

FCW Southern heavyweight

ECW heavyweight

WWE World

PWI Awards: None



Photo by Stu Saks

THE NUMBERS

Offense (9.0): Aside from enviable athletic gifts and his exceptional ring savvy, Swagger's meteoric ascension to the pinnacle of pro wrestling can be attributed to a singular trait: He's an opportunist. Like a shark that whiffs a drop of blood from an injured fish, Swagger finds the perfect moments to attack. Though cashing in his Money in the Bank title shot against a beaten Chris Jericho to claim the WWE World championship is the most obvious example of such vicious opportunism, nearly all of Swagger's victories can be chalked up to his impeccable timing and execution.

Defense (7.5): Swagger is so brazenly self-confident, so assured of his every move, that protecting himself seems almost like an afterthought. Even his surname, Swagger, conveys this unbridled cockiness. While it has served him well so far in his young career, Swagger has not yet faced the full spectrum of opponents that await him. Can he go toe-to-toe with a man bigger than he, such as The Undertaker? Can he keep pace with more fleet-footed foes like Rey Mysterio Jr.? The answer to those questions is: probably not. That's why he has to develop a defensive strategy.

Experience (7.0): There's no doubt that Swagger's resume boasts a stellar amateur background, both on the gridiron and the wrestling mat. And there's certainly no disputing that Swagger is one of the brightest stars to skyrocket out of WWE's developmental territories in the past decade. In just two years, he has gone from a lackluster ranking of 222 to 18 in the "PWI 500," as well as winning the WWE World championship. But WWE is a big yard full of hungry dogs, many of which have been around much longer than he. Swagger's success is extremely impressive, but his career has only just begun.

Conditioning (9.5): The term "gifted athlete" gets thrown around a lot by overzealous commentators, but when applied to a marvel like Swagger, the word rings true. Fortuitous genetics gave him a powerful frame that is muscular but not bulky. His collegiate training gave him the cardiovascular wherewithal to soldier through pain and fatigue. His youth gives him the resilience to recover and the longevity to remain at the top for years to come.

Science (8.5): It's almost frightening how quickly and seamlessly "The All-American American" has risen to the upper echelon of professional wrestling after his standout collegiate career. He has quickly adapted devastating techniques such as the abdominal stretch and a bevy of suplex combinations. Yet such maneuvers are closely tied to amateur holds and throws. Over time, Swagger will likely incorporate more diverse techniques into his arsenal, but until then, his mixture of brawling and grappling is serving him well.

Stamina (9.5): It's no wonder Jim Ross, while still serving as talent scout for WWE, picked Swagger for a developmental

contract. What Ross saw then, and what the rest of us have seen since, is that Swagger is a physical example of the highest caliber. At 6'6", he's a big man who moves with the precision and speed of an athlete a fraction his size. While he has yet to be put to the test in a 20-minute barnburner, much less a match that spans 60 minutes, there's no reason to believe Swagger can't go the distance—any distance.

Power (9.0): We've all seen it as Swagger struts to the ring: He tilts back his head and beats his chest with his fists, like a gorilla defending its territory. It's a symbolic expression of power, and he backs it up in the ring. While he doesn't have the rippling physique of a carb-cutting, protein-popping gym rat, Swagger possesses an overall strength that allows him to manhandle his opponents with an array of suplexes, slams, and momentum-based moves.

Ability To Absorb Punishment (7.0): Swagger much prefers to dole out punishment than absorb it. Despite his reign as ECW champion, Swagger has not engaged in many battles that could be called particularly extreme. His Money in the Bank victory at WrestleMania 26 proved he can dish out—and withstand—some serious pain, but there are still several big men on WWE's roster he's yet to face.

Quality Of Opposition (7.0): Swagger's prodigious rise from no-named ECW upstart to World champion saw him leapfrog many members of the WWE roster. Sure, he has toppled the likes of Tommy Dreamer, Matt Hardy, Finlay, MVP, and other capable combatants, but Swagger has not yet been fully tested. Until he does battle with bona fide A-listers like Triple-H, 'Taker, Edge, or Mysterio, the true extent of Swagger's talents won't be known. So far, he hasn't fared well against Randy Orton, who is a premier talent.



①

Swagger's body isn't rippling with muscle, but men like Christian have reported that not only is he extremely strong he is difficult to move where he doesn't want to go.



② Because he can assert himself with both brawling and wrestling tactics, Swagger is rarely on the defensive. It takes one tough man to keep Tommy Dreamer on his heels.



③ In college, Swagger set an NCAA record with 30 pins in a single wrestling season. His technique, even as a pro, is so finely tuned, some compare him to a young Kurt Angle.

Though he beat Chris Jericho for the World title, Swagger is still relatively untested in WWE. Victories over the likes of Cena, Batista, and The Undertaker would solidify Swagger as a top-tier talent.

THE ANALYSIS

Repertoire: Swagger has ring savvy well beyond his years, and an uncanny aptitude for learning new techniques. For now, his style remains fundamentally rooted in the Greco-Roman basics (with a dose of old-fashioned brawling thrown in), but he'll undoubtedly expand his arsenal over time. Don't be surprised if, five years from now, commentators refer to Swagger as a ring technician reminiscent of Bret Hart, Dory Funk Jr., or even Kurt Angle.

Strengths: It's tough to count all the attributes that work in Swagger's favor—natural athleticism, favorable genetics, well-rounded training, a killer instinct, the gift of gab, and so on. But Swagger's greatest strength might be the one that infuriates many opponents and fans: his overflowing supply of self-confidence. While it might occasionally get him into trouble, Swagger has the winning attitude that has led to his winning ways.

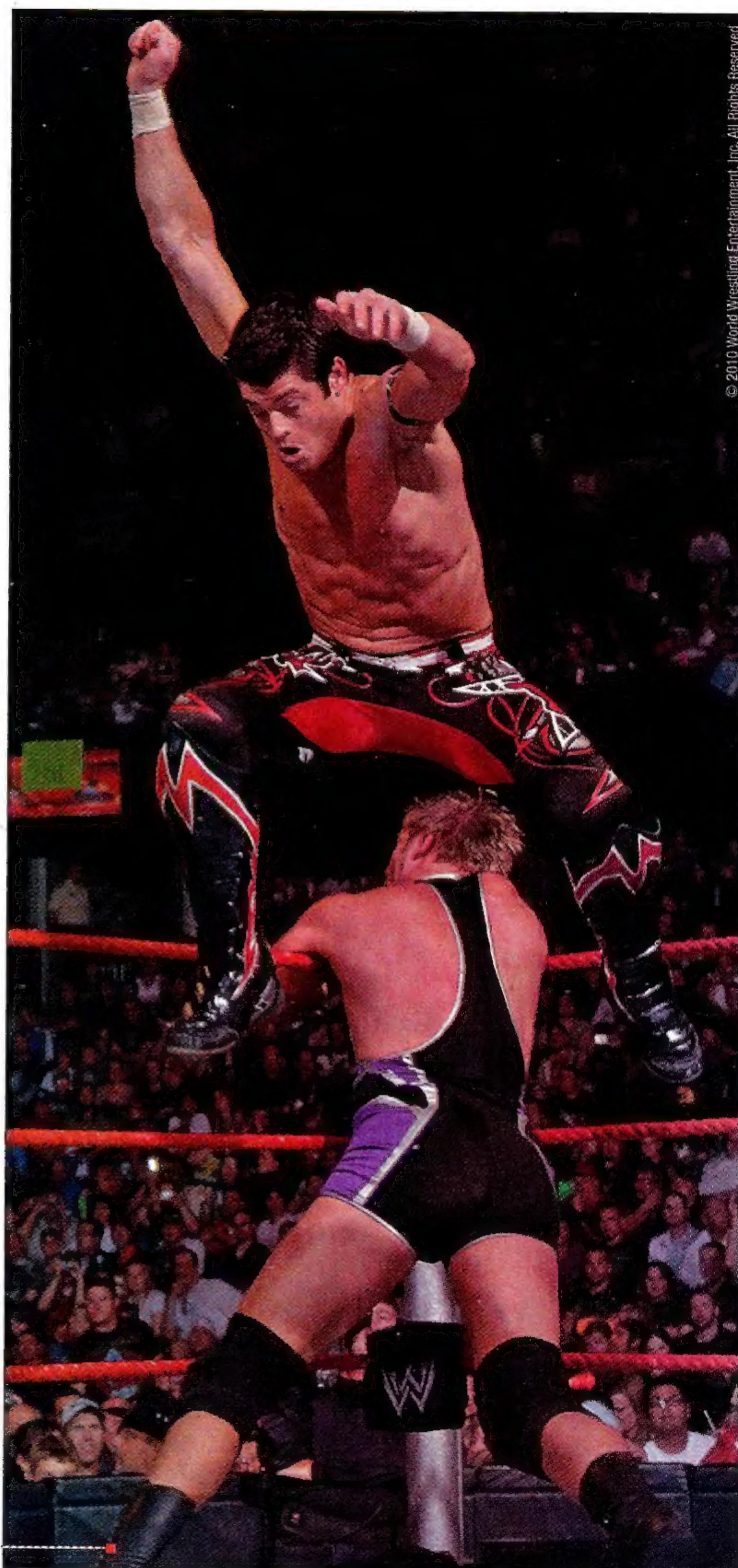
Weaknesses: The Greek mythological fable of Icarus is a cautionary tale about flying too high, too fast. Like Icarus, whose wings melted when he flew too close to the sun, Swagger might unwittingly find himself plummeting from the great heights he has achieved so quickly. Swagger needs to keep one foot planted on the ground, lest he forget that an entire roster of highly dangerous wrestlers are hoping to knock him off his pedestal. If he doesn't, Swagger's incredible ascension might also prove to be his downfall.

Future: The only problem with shooting straight to the top is that there's nowhere to go but down. By establishing his dominance so early in his career, Jack Swagger has essentially painted a bull's-eye on his own back. Can he handle the onslaught coming up? Judging by his career thus far, the answer is uncertain. He has all the makings of a top WWE superstar for the next decade, but he'll need to face and defeat some of WWE's more established players before he truly proves he's as great as he insists. □

While confidence is Swagger's greatest asset, it can also be his greatest weakness. His self-assuredness allowed him to take Jericho's World title but also caused him to underestimate and lose to Evan Bourne.

5

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OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

- 1 JOHN CENA**
240, West Newbury, MA
(5) WWE heavyweight champion
- 2 JACK SWAGGER**
263 Perry, OK
(-) WWE World champion
- 3 ROB VAN DAM**
236, Battle Creek, MI
(-) TNA World champion
- 4 EDGE**
250, Toronto, Ontario
(-) No. 1 contender WWE title
- 5 A.J. STYLES**
215, Gainesville, GA
(2) No. 1 contender TNA World title
- 6 RANDY ORTON**
245, St. Louis, MO
(-) No. 2 contender WWE title
- 7 CHRIS JERICHO**
226, Manhasset, NY
(1) No. 3 contender WWE title
- 8 TYLER BLACK**
210, Davenport, IA
(3) Ring of Honor champion
- 9 SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
245, Kyoto, Japan
(-) IWGP heavyweight champion
- 10 THE Miz**
230, Cleveland, OH
(-) WWE United States champion

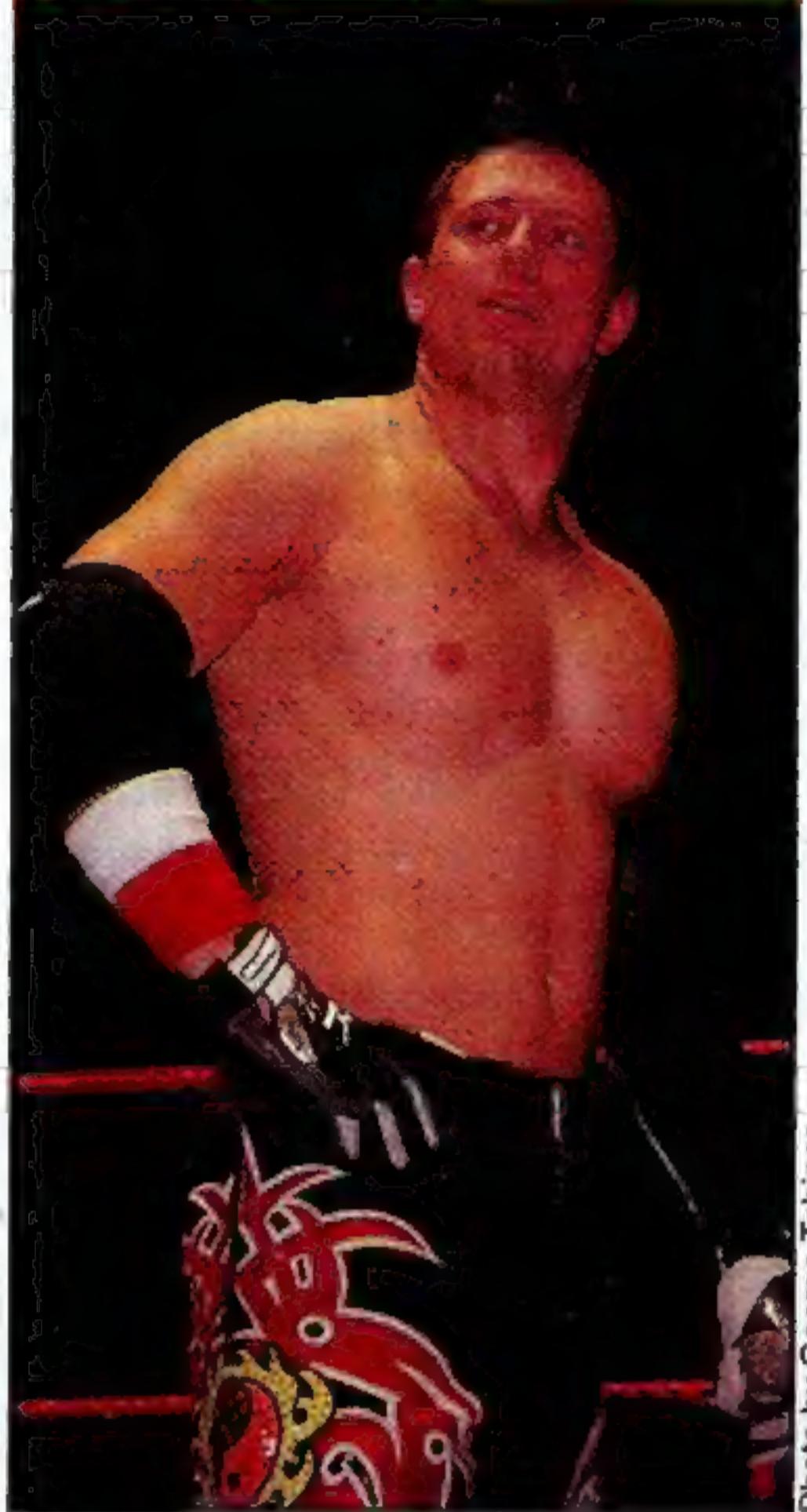


Photo by George Tahinos

THE MIZ

TAG TEAMS

- 1 DAVID HART SMITH & TYSON KIDD**
Combined weight: 455 pounds
(-) WWE Unified tag team champions
- 2 CHRIS HERO & CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI**
Combined weight: 447 pounds
(-) ROH tag team champions
- 3 TAKESHI RIKIO & MUHAMMED YONE**
Combined weight: 500 pounds
(7) Pro Wrestling NOAH tag team champions
- 4 ROBERT ROODE & JAMES STORM**
Combined weight: 495 pounds
(9) No. 1 contenders TNA World tag title
- 5 JOHN MORRISON & R-TRUTH**
Combined weight: 447 pounds
(-) No. 1 contenders WWE Unified tag title
- 6 CHRIS SABIN & ALEX SHELLEY**
Combined weight: 410 pounds
(6) No. 2 contenders TNA World tag title
- 7 JIMMY & JULES USO**
Combined weight: 562 pounds
(-) FCW tag team champions
- 8 YUJIRO & TETSUYA NAITO**
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(-) IWGP tag team champions
- 9 BROTHER RAY & BROTHER DEVON**
Combined weight: 560 pounds
(-) No. 3 contenders TNA World tag title
- 10 JAY & MARK BRISCOE**
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(2) No. 1 contenders ROH tag team title

RAW

WWE Champion:

JOHN CENA
(1) 240, West Newbury, MA

- 1—EDGE**
(-) 250, Toronto, Ontario
- 2—RANDY ORTON**
(5) 245, St. Louis, MO
- 3—CHRIS JERICHO**
(-) 226, Manhasset, NY
- 4—THE Miz**
(3) 231, Cleveland, OH
- 5—SHEAMUS**
(2) 280, Dublin, Ireland
- 6—TED DIBIASE JR.**
(6) 235, West Palm Beach, FL
- 7—JOHN MORRISON**
(-) 219, Los Angeles, CA
- 8—EVAN BOURNE**
(-) 210, St. Louis, MO
- 9—TRIPLE-H**
(7) 255, Greenwich, CT
- 10—YOSHI TATSU**
(-) 220, Gifu, Japan

SMACKDOWN

World Champion:

JACK SWAGGER
(-) 263, Perry, OK

- 1—BATISTA**
(-) 290, Washington, DC
- 2—BIG SHOW**
(-) 441, Aiken, SC
- 3—DREW McINTYRE**
(4) 270, Ayr, Scotland
- 4—REY MYSTERIO JR.**
(3) 175, San Diego, CA
- 5—C.M. PUNK**
(6) 222, Chicago, IL
- 6—DOLPH ZIGGLER**
(9) 221, Hollywood, CA
- 7—KANE**
(7) 323, Hell
- 8—LUKE GALLONS**
(-) 302, Cumberland, MD
- 9—CODY RHODES**
(-) 223, Charlotte, NC
- 10—KOFI KINGSTON**
(-) 218, Ghana, West Africa

TNA

World Champion:

ROB VAN DAM
(-) 236, Battle Creek, MI

- 1—A.J. STYLES**
(C) 215, Gainesville, GA
- 2—ABYSS**
(8) 350, Parts Unknown
- 3—JEFF HARDY**
(-) 232, Cameron, SC
- 4—D'ANGELO DINERO**
(1) 230, Harlem, NY
- 5—JEFF JARRETT**
(-) 230, Nashville, TN
- 6—MR. ANDERSON**
(2) 243, Green Bay, WI
- 7—KURT ANGLE**
(3) 233, Pittsburgh, PA
- 8—DOUG WILLIAMS**
(7) 235, Manchester, England
- 9—KAZARIAN**
(-) 220, Anaheim, CA
- 10—ROB TERRY**
(10) 260, Swansea, England

RING OF HONOR

Champion:

TYLER BLACK
(C) 210, Davenport, IA

- 1—RODERICK STRONG**
(6) 212, Tampa, FL
- 2—KEVIN STEEN**
(3) 220, Quebec, Canada
- 3—DAVEY RICHARDS**
(5) 205, Othello, WA
- 4—KENNY KING**
(4) 230, Las Vegas, NV
- 5—EDDIE EDWARDS**
(7) 214, Boston, MA
- 6—COLT CABANA**
(8) 233, Chicago, IL
- 7—AUSTN ARIES**
(1) 202, Milwaukee, WI
- 8—CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI**
(2) 240, Schaffhausen, Switz.
- 9—DELIRIOUS**
(9) 194, Edge of Sanity
- 10—KENNY OMEGA**
(10) 200, Waikiki, HI

Top 10 and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (—) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

FOR PERIOD ENDED APRIL 30, 2010

COMBAT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—Jon Moxley; 1—Sami Callihan; 2—Ego Fantastico; 3—Eddie Kingston; 4—Drake Younger; 5—Sabian; 6—Drew Gulak; 7—Adam Cole; 8—J.C. Bailey; 9—Brain Damage; 10—Masada.

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Bazooka Joe; 1—Aden Chambers; 2—Mega; 3—Nick Logan; 4—Chase Del Monte; 5—Andrew Ryker; 6—Freak Nasty; 7—Mr. Scott Wright; 8—Matt Logan; 9—Brian Logan; 10—Billy Bax.

GAWF: Champion—Steve Goins; 1—Dallas Riley; 2—Vordel Walker; 3—Bobby Sanford; 4—Tommy Taylor; 5—Shawn Spears; 6—Maxwell Alvarez; 7—Prince Iuakea; 8—Michael Patrick; 9—Morgan Davis III; 10—Nathan Crown.

I BELIEVE IN WRESTLING: Champion—Jon Moxley; 1—Brad Allen; 2—Roderick Strong; 3—T.J. Perkins; 4—Erick Stevens; 5—Rhett Titus; 6—Chasyn Rance; 7—Jigsaw; 8—Caleb Konley; 9—Bruce Santee; 10—Johnny Vandal.

NWA DAWG POUND: Champion—Chance Prophet; 1—Ricky Reyes; 2—Nunzio; 3—Nick Gage; 4—Biggie Biggs; 5—Cory Kastle; 6—Joey Spades; 7—Jo Jo; 8—Rob Eckos; 9—Judas Young; 10—Rick Maters.

PLATINUM CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Shane Marx; 1—Nemesis; 2—Scott Steele; 3—Jay Fury; 4—Mason; 5—Austin Creed; 6—Najasism; 7—The Phantom; 8—Simon Sermon; 9—Pandora; 10—Goth.

RIVER CITY WRESTLING: Champion—SKAM 13; 1—Keith Lee; 2—Big Dogg; 3—JoJo Bravo; 4—Skitzo; 5—Sicodelico Jr.; 6—Ann Dromeda; 7—Joey Spector; 8—Hernandez; 9—Andy Dalton; 10—Rudy Russo.

SEVERE ATTITUDE WRESTLING: Champion—Trooper T; 1—Edward Idol; 2—Shawn Streets; 3—So Cal Kid; 4—Jeff Anderson; 5—The Rip; 6—Malice; 7—J Mac; 8—Jimmy Golden; 9—Matt Mayhem; 10—Eddie Golden.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS WRESTLING: Champion—Rajin Rick Morgan; 1—Lukas Frost; 2—Damien Storm; 3—Wade Garrett; 4—Roosevelt; 5—Charles West; 6—Adam Hart; 7—Seville; 8—Rob Anarchy; 9—Justin Matthews; 10—Enhancement Kid.

TEXAS ALL-STAR WRESTLING: Champion—Nick Daniels; 1—Mysterious Q; 2—ZenZen; 3—Alex Evans; 4—Gustavo Mendoza; 5—Scoby Gober; 6—Hector Montoya; 7—Rockstar Robbie; 8—Billy B; 9—Ryan Davidson; 10—The Bulkster.

TEXAS CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Calvin Knapp; 1—Tim Swiney; 2—Cody Knight; 3—Ruben Rivera; 4—Tyler Maverick; 5—Dr. Knuckles; 6—Big Poppa Jones; 7—Billy Club; 8—Rommel 2; 9—Billy Bong; 10—“The Original” MVP.

TRADITIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Jeff Jett; 1—Tim Storm; 2—Prince Al Farat; 3—Matt Riviera; 4—Greg Anthony; 5—Dexter Hardaway; 6—Alan Steele; 7—Bobby Eaton; 8—Apoc; 9—Shawn Shultz; 10—El Super Colibri.

NWA

Champion:
ADAM PEARCE

(1) 248, San Diego, CA

1—PHIL SHATTER
(2) 247, Paris Island, SC

2—BLUE DEMON JR.
(0) 228, Mexico City, Mexico

3—SCOTTY MACK
(3) 205, Kelowna, B.C.

4—OLIVER JOHN
(4) 228, Sacramento, CA

5—SHANE HASTE
(—) 205, Queensland, Australia

6—THE SHEIK
(6) 265, Tehran, Iran

7—ANTONIO THOMAS
(7) 235, Panama City, FL

8—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(8) 245, Kyoto, Japan

9—SID SYLUM
(9) 218, Las Vegas, NV

10—KEVIN NORTHCUTT

(10) 260, Chalmette, LA

JAPAN

1—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA

(2) 245, Kyoto, Japan
IWGP heavyweight champion

2—TAKASHI SUGIURA

(—) 245, Aichi, Japan
GHC heavyweight champion

3—RYOTA HAMA

(—) 452, Osaka, Japan
AJPW Triple Crown champion

4—HIROOKI GOTO

(8) 227, Gifu, Japan

5—MINORU SUZUKI

(—) 225, Yokohama, Japan

6—NAOMICHI MARAFUJI

(1) 200, Saitama, Japan

7—GO SHIOZAKI

(—) 220, Kumamoto, Japan

8—HIROSHI TANAHASHI

(5) 231, Gifu, Japan

9—KENSUKE SASAKI

(—) 254, Fukuoka, Japan

10—KAZ HAYASHI

(—) 183, Tokyo, Japan

MEXICO

1—ELECTRO SHOCK

(—) 260, Mexico City, Mexico

2—DR. WAGNER JR.

(2) 216 Torreon, Mexico

3—EL MESIAS

(—) 245, Bayamon, Puerto Rico

4—ULTIMO GUERRERO

(3) 210, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

5—LA SOMBRA

(—) 180, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

6—MISTICO

(1) 170, Mexico City, Mexico

7—FELINO

(—) 190, Mexico City, Mexico

8—HECTOR GARZA

(5) 209, Monterrey, Mexico

9—SHOCKER

(7) 220, Los Angeles, CA

10—REY BUCANERO

(—) 210, Mexico City, Mexico

WOMEN

1—BETH PHOENIX

(—) 150, Buffalo, NY

2—MADISON RAYNE

(—) 115, Seattle, WA

3—EVE TORRES

(—) 131, Los Angeles, CA

4—MADISON EAGLES

(—) 160, Sydney, Australia

5—ANGELINA LOVE

(3) 118, Toronto, Ontario

6—MERCEDES MARTINEZ

(8) 147, Waterbury, CT

7—MICHELLE McCOOL

(5) 135, Palatka, FL

8—TARA

(1) 155, Los Angeles, CA

9—RAIN

(—) 124, St. Paul, MN

10—AMBER O'NEAL

(—) 140, Malibu, CA